

What R U Up 2?

March 4, 2018

Title: Raise Up

Scripture: Psalm 19

I Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

One of the first songs I remember learning was “Away in a Manger”. I was thinking about the words to that song this week. “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed. The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. ... The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.”

As much as I love this song, it definitely contributes to the idea of Jesus as meek and mild. Can you imagine a baby be awakened by cattle and not crying? While there are many places in our scripture where Jesus seems to be meek or mild, today’s Gospel is definitely not one of them. Today we see Jesus passionate and even violent. I believe it is the only time in the scripture when we see him act in a violent way. We saw his passion last week, when he told Peter to “Get behind me, Satan” when Peter rebuked Jesus after he told his disciples that he would suffer and die.

Today, we see that same passion, but this time it is also accompanied by action – violent action. In the temple, Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers, and drove them and animal sellers out of the temple with a whip of cords. Very definitely, not meek and mild. In today’s culture, we would call this a crime of violence.

He told them, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” In Matthew’s gospel, some translations use the phrase “den of thieves” or “robbers” making his reaction even stronger than John’s gospel. Jesus is definitely not meek and mild here. By the way, in those cases where Jesus

does appear to be more meek and mild, I believe he is exhibiting a different kind of strength and power. But here, he is showing his passion about something very important to him.

The temple was constructed with various sections to it. The outer part of the temple was called the Court of the Gentiles, and this was supposed to be a place where people who were not Jewish could also come to worship. The temple was to be a place that drew all people to God. But temple regulations required that people coming to offer a sacrifice or coming to bring an offering had to have animals that were perfect – with no blemish. These could best be purchased at the temple. Offerings were to be made only with special coins designed for the temple, so people would bring their coins and exchange them for temple currency. By Jesus' time, this had become a big business and it all took place in the Court of the Gentiles which meant that they had no place to worship.

Jesus' passion and anger involved the way the purpose of the temple – to be a place for all people to worship – had been usurped by the regulations, money changers and merchants. Rules, regulations, and laws were a source of frustration for Jesus on more than one occasion. Jesus seemed much more focused on the intent of the rules, how they enabled people to be in relation with God, rather than on the letter of the law.

Those of us who are not lawyers probably have no real understanding of how complicated our laws have become. My nephew who is an attorney was attending a conference this week on immigration law. I remembered several years ago asking him what I thought was a fairly simple question about immigration. He told me that he specialized in a different area of immigration law and could not answer my question. It

was a reminder to me of how little I really know about most of this and how complicated the laws are.

This is what had happened with religious laws. The Psalm today is a hymn praising God in two different ways. First it talks about how we see and know God through the beauty and majesty of creation. Then it focuses on the law of God and how perfect it is; how it delights the heart. The psalmist proclaims that the law is to be desired even more than gold and is sweeter than even honey. The psalmist recognizes that God pays attention not only to our actions but even to the thoughts of our heart and celebrates this.

This is likely not the way we think about rules and regulations. Most of us don't get excited about them, but that may be because we miss what God's laws are really all about. Think, for a minute, about the Ten Commandments. I know that typically we hear them as "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" strict rules to be obeyed. Think about how the Ten Commandments begin. They don't start with "Here are Ten commandments that you have to obey" rather they start with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." With this sweeping announcement of freedom, we can hear them as invitations to God's liberation. "Because the Lord is your God, you are free to not need any other gods. You are free from the tyranny of lifeless idols. You are free to rest on the Sabbath. You are free to enjoy your parents as long as they live. You are set free from murder, stealing, and covetousness as ways to establish yourself in the land."ⁱ

When seen this way, the Ten Commandments and all of God's law is designed to reveal what is good and beneficial and truly pleasant for

humans, not strict rules that we need to follow because God delights in putting restrictions on us.

As Jesus came into the temple in today's gospel, it is almost the Passover – a time when Jews focused on the Exodus, when they focused on God delivering them from slavery. The focus of the Passover was on the expectation of deliverance and freedom, not on more laws. Yet, when faithful Jews arrived at the temple to celebrate Passover, they were met immediately by those who would most profit by charging fees and high prices to purchase a blemish free animal for the sacrifice, or exchanging currency for the required currency of the temple.

Imagine if, the first thing that greeted you when you arrived to worship God was someone charging you money to convert your money into special money that said, "Wesley UMC" on it. Imagine if someone wanted to charge you money to sit in a particular seat, with some seats being more expensive than others. These wouldn't exactly put you in the mood to worship God, would it?

Jesus' actions in the temple were considered important enough to be included in all four gospels – so this cleansing of the temple is significant. I hadn't noticed before, but instead of the authorities arresting him, or trying to stop him, they ask, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" They are asking him about his authority. What right does he have for doing this?

This is the real significance of this action. Jesus response is, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Of course, those hearing him, thought of the physical temple in which they were standing. The first temple had been destroyed more than 600 years earlier, and this new temple had been under construction for 46 years and would require about another 20 years to be completed.

Jesus was not speaking about the physical temple. He was talking about his body. He was telling them about his death and resurrection, but, of course, they didn't yet understand any of this. Jesus was claiming that he was the new temple, that would be destroyed and then risen again in three days.

As followers of Jesus, we talk about being the body of Christ. Last week, we asked what it means to be a Disciple of Jesus. We talked about "taking up" our cross, taking up the things that Jesus is passionate about, standing up for justice, mercy, compassion. We talked about how that sometimes means giving up something we want so that others can have what they truly need. We talked about caring for other people, the way that Jesus did.

Today, our question is, "What does it mean to be the church of Jesus? How might we rise up as the Body of Christ to be a holy temple – a holy dwelling place of God in the world?" I think that there are many parts to that. In light of today's gospel and Jesus' actions in the temple, I think that one of the places we start is to look at our own practices as a congregation. Jesus recognized that the practice of money changers and animal sellers in the Court of the Gentiles was not a practice that was life giving and led people to God. We might ask if there are practices within our own congregation that exclude others or make them feel unwelcome or less than other people. If so, then we need to change those.

What practices within our congregation are life giving and lead people closer to God? What practices are not? What cultural values do we bring to being a Christian? We are a diverse congregation, and we need to find ways to be sure that our worship practices and our behavior as a congregation brings others closer to God, rather than excluding. Those

may not be easy questions to answer, and we need to be careful that if one of us raises a question or concern that is different than the culture or practices that others of us find comfortable that we need to listen to our brother or sister and Christ and recognize that we all have different ways of being drawn closer to God. We may need to ask ourselves if the music, worship style and other things we do help people who are new to feel comfortable worshipping here.

Beyond looking at what we do here as a congregation, being the church of Jesus means we also ask what we are doing to help our world know more about Jesus. How do we let other people know we are here? How do we go out into the community to witness to our faith? I received a call this week asking if there were people from our congregation who would like to participate in the Good Friday Walk for Hunger in Providence and whether or not we might have a sign that we could carry to testify to who we are and the presence of United Methodists in working to eradicate hunger. I will have more information about that possibility soon.

I know that we participate in collecting supplies for the schools in Liberia. Through our mission shares, we participate in being the church of Jesus Christ together with United Methodists locally and around the world.

When we are aware of people who are facing injustice, people who are victims or survivors of domestic violence or abuse, either children or adults, are there ways that we as a congregation, as the church of Jesus respond?

This week I also received notice of a grant through the United Methodist Foundation of up to \$5,000 that can be used as seed money to start a new ministry if we have a passion for beginning something new.

Following a storm like this week's, have we thought about ways to reach out to each other or to a neighbor to be sure that people have warm, safe places to stay when they lose power? The possibilities of ways to respond is limited only by our imagination and our openness to God's call in our lives.

During this week, I invite you to ponder the questions, "How might we rise up as the Body of Christ and be a holy temple – a holy dwelling place of God in the world? What does it mean for us, here at Wesley in Lincoln, to be the church of Jesus?"

ⁱ Roos, Joe from "The Foolishness of the Cross" published in Preaching the Word, Sojourners, March 4.