

Message for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year B (3/7/2021)
John 2:13-22

I was cool with Jesus until he started destroying property. I mean, I sympathize with his message, but those vendors and money changers in the temple are good people just trying to run a business. Protest is fine up to a point, but Jesus crossed a line. Now, I can't hear a word he has to say.

Forgive the sarcasm, but it's hard to miss the striking parallel between the temple incident in our Gospel from John today and contemporary civil disobedience. Jesus isn't out of control in the temple. It's not just an impulsive outburst; he interferes with business as usual by design. Notice that Jesus takes time to fashion a whip (a detail that only John's Gospel mentions), then methodically, unflinchingly expels both sellers and money changers, together with the sacrificial animals, during one of the most important religious festivals of the year.¹ Tables are flipped, coins are strewn about, and temple functionaries and pilgrims alike are stunned. It's a holy disruption, a deliberate intervention to draw everyone's attention to the message: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

In this way, the temple incident is a public demonstration consistent with Israel's prophetic tradition,² a calculated sign-act that serves to critique the religious establishment in memorable fashion.

¹ See Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 545.

² E.g. Jeremiah 19:1-15; Ezekiel 4:1-5:7.

But, it's also reminiscent of direct action campaigns in our time. I'm reminded, for instance, of the late congressman John Lewis, who served in the House of Representatives from 1987 until his death last year, following decades of work as an organizer and activist. Lewis is perhaps best known for leading the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on this date in 1965. The march was originally planned as a 54-mile trek from Selma to the Alabama state capital of Montgomery to demand voting rights for black Alabamans and to protest violent repression by agents of the state. In Dallas County, Alabama, black residents made up more than 50 percent of the population, but represented only 2 percent of registered voters.

As we well know, the march never reached the opposite side of the bridge, let alone the state capital. Ordered to disperse, the demonstrators stood their ground, at which point they were met with tear gas and billy clubs, thrown to the ground and beaten by state troopers and sheriff's deputies while dozens of bystanders waving Confederate flags looked on and cheered. In spite of the terror, the more than 600 marchers never fought back. John Lewis himself, only twenty-five at the time, was badly injured. Later that night, footage of the crackdown aired nationwide, turning what began as a local protest into a national event in the struggle for civil rights. "Bloody Sunday," they called it.³

³ Christopher Klein, "How Selma's 'Bloody Sunday' Became a Turning Point in the Civil Rights Movement," www.history.com/news/selma-bloody-sunday-attack-civil-rights-movement.

If only the demonstrators had complied with the order to disperse – if only they had acquiesced to business as usual – then they might not have gotten hurt. But, the righteousness and urgency of their cause superseded their fear of the consequences. Their courageous defiance was a holy disruption, and it succeeded in drawing everyone’s attention to the message: *Stop making a mockery of the Constitution! Stop suppressing the people’s rights!*

In a now-famous 2018 tweet, John Lewis coined another term for holy disruption: “Do not get lost in a sea of despair,” he wrote. “Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”⁴

Even when we know that something is amiss, we tend to shy away from good trouble, to avoid righteous conflict. Maybe we’re afraid of being harmed by abusive power, like so many civil rights activists. More likely, we’re afraid of being maligned or ostracized, of being excluded from polite society. **We know that challenges to the status quo will always be fiercely opposed,⁵ so we stay seated, we keep quiet, and we let business as usual continue unchallenged.**

But, gospel freedom costs something. Jesus knows what the necessary consequence of his confrontation with power will be. *You will destroy this temple,*

⁴ www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/07/18/rep-john-lewis-most-memorable-quotes-get-good-trouble/5464148002/.

⁵ W. Hulitt Gloer, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 95.

he tells his opponents in Jerusalem, referring, of course, to “the temple of his body.” *But, in three days I will raise it back up.*

It’s the promise of resurrection that steels Jesus’ conviction and propels him into conflict with the authorities. It’s his unswerving devotion to God’s kingdom come on Earth as in heaven, his vision of abundant life with God and neighbor, that gets Jesus into good trouble.

And in this way, the temple incident is a story of moral courage for the ages.⁶ God’s love is perfect, and perfect love casts out fear.⁷ So, Jesus’ holy disruption in the temple sets a pattern for disciples in every generation, emboldening us in our faith in God and love for our neighbors. That faithfulness and love was apparent in the movement for civil and human rights of the mid-20th century. What about today? Friends, where is God summoning up your moral courage to cause a holy disruption, to get in good trouble? What is amiss in our shared life, and what are you willing to do about it? What might it cost you, and what might we all gain as a result?

⁶ Julie Scheer Johnson, Preaching Peace Tacoma, March 2, 2021.

⁷ 1 John 4:18.