

Who let that man into the market with a whip?

Hespeler, 7 March 2021 © Scott McAndless – Lent 3

Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

A lot of people really struggle with the story that we read this morning from the Gospel of John – basically the same story that is told in all of the Gospels – of how Jesus went into the temple in Jerusalem, and he got really mad. In what almost seems like a tantrum, he was overturning tables, and shouting and screaming at all the people. He was whipping the animals and ordering people around. It just seems to go against so much of the image of Jesus that we have in our minds. Is this “gentle Jesus meek and mild”? Is this the same man who taught his followers to turn the other cheek and to love their enemies? How could the one who came to save humanity show so much anger?

Why we made whips today

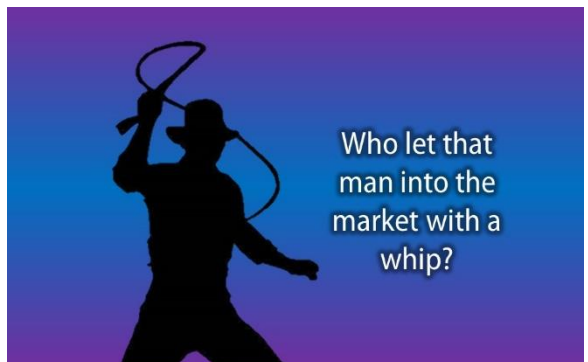
Those are all really good questions, and I think there are ways of working through them. And I’d like to do that today by focusing in on an object, an object that is only explicitly mentioned in John’s Gospel but that is kind of taken for granted in the others. The object I’m talking about, of course, is a whip. I was kind of struck by John’s note that Jesus made a whip of cords. I was so struck by it, in fact, that I had you folks make a whip for today.

Now, I didn’t do that without some second guessing. I had a little bit of trouble with the idea of asking kids to make what is essentially a weapon. And I, like any experienced father, immediately imagined scenes of kids using them to whip each other. And then I imagined parents getting very angry with me. But, of course, it says right there in the Bible that Jesus made one, so how could I be blamed for having people follow the example of Jesus?

Why did Jesus make a whip?

But let’s ask the question for a moment, why did Jesus make a whip? The fact that he made it on the spot indicates that he had not really planned this. That is actually a bit of a surprising note in the Gospel of John which often insists that every single step of what Jesus did while he was in Jerusalem was all preordained and that Jesus knew everything that would happen and actually made sure that it happened that way.

But, in this passage, John seems to indicate that Jesus hadn’t planned what happened in the temple. Instead, he just picked up some of the pieces of rope and cord that are always lying around in any busy marketplace, and he braided them together to make a whip on the spot. It was not pre-planned; it was rather that Jesus got rather swept up in a moment.



Who let that
man into the
market with a
whip?

The temple in Jerusalem

So the big question in this story is what was it that made Jesus so upset. It is not as easy a question to answer as you might think. The temple in Jerusalem was, in Jesus' day, a massive complex. It might have encompassed two football fields. There were places for everyone there with courts for women, for Gentiles and for Jewish men as well as places reserved only to the priests.

The temple was also, quite likely, the largest marketplace in the city. It had to be. The temple was the only place where Jews were allowed to sacrifice which meant, for the great majority of people, it was the only place that they could go to actually supplement their diets with meat because, of course, the sacrifices were eaten by the worshipers. But, since the temple was a monopoly and people could sacrifice no place else, many of them came from great distances. They could not bring their sacrificial animals all that way, and so they would have to buy one when they arrived.

There were also money changing booths, but those too were also absolutely necessary. The money changing wasn't the fault of the Jews, but actually of the Romans. The Romans circulated coins that had images of emperors on them – images of people who the coins themselves proclaimed to be gods. And the law of Moses was very clear on that point, there were to be no graven images of any gods, especially not in the temple. And so the people had to exchange their coins for special currency that could be used in the temple.

All of these things were necessary in order for the temple to continue to exist, for the people to worship and to eat. These things were what made it possible for the temple to function as a house of prayer for all nations, and that is what it was. But apparently, when Jesus walked into the temple on that day, he saw something going on that was so disturbing that he suddenly felt that he had to do something. He grabbed the only thing that was available at hand, some bits of rope and chord, and he made himself a whip, a symbol of his anger at what was going on.

Was Jesus trying to shut the place down?

But what was it? When you read about it in the Gospel of John, which we read this morning, you get the impression that the issue was that there was a marketplace. **“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!”** is all that Jesus says. But, like I said, it's a bit puzzling for Jesus to be angry at that. The temple had always been a marketplace and it needed to be a marketplace to fulfill its proper function.

So, if Jesus was trying to shut down the market, he was essentially shutting down the whole institution. And I think that is a part of what is going on here. You see it in what Jesus goes on to say: **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”** Yes, I know that John reassures us that, when Jesus said that, he wasn't talking about the actual temple but about his own body, but by the time this gospel was written, the temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed. The readers could not help but make the connection between what Jesus had done and the ultimate destruction that he obviously anticipated. At the very least, Jesus was definitely pointing out the fragility of the temple as an ongoing institution for that society and anticipating the need to find new ways to think about what the temple accomplished for the people.

What Jesus says in the other gospels

There are other accounts in the other gospels of what Jesus said about the temple that I think we need to take into account. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus caused a disturbance in the temple saying, **“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’ But you have made it a den of robbers.”** Rather than being concerned about the marketplace, Jesus there talks about the need for the temple to be a house of prayer for all people. And indeed it was such a place. As I said, there was an entire court of the temple that was set aside for the people of all the nations to come and pray. But the problem, according to Mark, is that it has become a robber’s den.

I think a lot of people have misunderstood that. People have heard that accusation and assumed that there must have been some shady things going on in the temple. I remember, when I was younger, hearing sermons about how the entire temple system in Jerusalem must have been dedicated to ripping the people off – that people were being overcharged for the sacrificial animals and swindled in the money changing, you know that kind of thing. And those would indeed be serious problems worthy enough to make Jesus angry, but the fact of the matter is that there is no evidence that that kind of thing was going on in Jerusalem in the first century.

What is a robber’s den for?

And, in any case, that is not what Jesus is saying is happening. Jesus doesn’t call the temple a *crime scene*, he calls it a robber’s den. The den is not where robbers rob people, it is the place they come back to after they have finished their crimes. It is the place where robbers feel safe and maybe where they keep their ill-gotten gains. That is the accusation that Jesus makes against the temple, and it points to a much more insidious danger.

The real danger he is pointing to, and I do not believe that it was a particular danger to that temple or within Jewish religion, is actually a danger that is common to all religion. The danger is that people use their religious practices, their prayers, their sacrifices and their religious observances to give themselves a sense of security and a sense that they are all right.

Just like robbers feel comfortable in their robber’s den, they use their outward shows of religiosity and righteousness to allow themselves not to worry about things like systemic injustice, economic exploitation or hidden oppression, especially when they can benefit from it themselves. I cannot help but believe that it was that, more than anything else, that animated Jesus on that day.

Our discomfort with anger

And he was angry. He was in a spontaneous rage. And I know people feel uncomfortable with that. We get very nervous around anger and the expression of anger. Some might suggest it’s an emotion that we should always suppress. But the emotion itself is not a bad thing. Yes, of course, there are bad ways to express or deal with your anger, but the emotion itself should not be feared if we can find ways of dealing with it that help instead of hurt. Indeed, suppressing anger can sometimes lead to very damaging effects including mental health problems and the erosion of important relationships in our lives. So, I believe we can actually look to Jesus in this story as a model for dealing with legitimate anger in helpful ways.

Jesus takes his anger and uses it to try to make people think differently about what they are really doing. He chooses to use it, not to lash out and certainly not to attack or seek to hurt people, but to attack the very thing that he is concerned about, the comfort that people find in religion that makes it, for them, a safe den where robbers can shelter. That is what his whip represents.

A spiritual exercise with whips

So, many of you have brought a whip to our service today. I asked you to make one just like Jesus made one in the temple. Jesus' whip is a disturbing symbol. It is meant to be. I'd like to ask you to pick up your whip if you have one or to imagine one if you don't.

As you contemplate your whip, I'm going to ask you a question. What makes you angry in the world around you today. Now, I'm not talking about the kind of anger that we usually experience when somebody hurts us or disrespects us or mistreats us personally. That is a legitimate anger, and we need to find productive ways to express that anger when it arises, but that is not the kind of anger that I want to focus on today.

I want you to think of something that is going on in our society, some systemic problem that maybe disadvantages certain people or groups. I want you to focus on some tendency that is eroding something important. You will not all be thinking of the same thing, and that is as it should be. But you should be able to think of something because I do believe that God lays these kinds of issues on our hearts. Sometimes we suppress that anger or hide from it because we're afraid of it. But if we allow ourselves to be open to it, I suspect that God will show us things that we should be angry about.

Now, as you hold onto your whip, I want you to think about how you can make things just a little less comfortable for those people who perpetuate that injustice. What can you do to disrupt their easy assumption that they are superior, more righteous or more worthy, perhaps because of their race, religion or mission. That is what Jesus was doing with his whip, stopping the temple from being a place where people could escape their complicity. Will you take up your whip, will you wield it with care. This, too, is to follow the example of Christ.

Final prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you that you did get angry in the temple. You did it to show us that anger, in itself, is not a bad thing. What matters is how we express it and that we do so in constructive ways. Thank you for the anger that you send us at the injustice of this world, help us to find constructive ways to use that anger to build towards a better world, as Jesus did. Amen.