

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

If I go back to my growing up years, it will be hard for me to imagine Jesus in our passage today. As I have mentioned to some of you in the past, I grew up in the image and personality of Jesus as a gentle, mild-mannered person. The logic being – why would Jesus advocate for children, those that are considered the least of these, or even why would a lot of people follow him if there was any level of aggression in him. Jesus, as I was taught at home, in Sunday School or even in school (because I went to a Methodist university for high school and college) can be a person's friend, confidante and all of those things. And we are of course always drawn to persons who have somewhat timid personalities. Although I must say, I have friends who are less than timid. But that will be a topic for another conversation.

Today's gospel reading did not show that Jesus was a gentle, timid and mild-mannered. We saw an angry Jesus, the kind of individual that I will be scared to mess with. In the different narratives of the life of Jesus, also known as the gospels, there were versions that told the story of this side of Jesus' anger. In Matthew 21:12 and Mark 11:15, Jesus overturned the tables in the temple out of anger. Luke 19:46 showed a watered-down version of this anger because Jesus 'just' drove out the vendors, however in our passage today, verse 15 tells that he made a whip of cords which was used to drive out the people who are selling the animals that are to be used for sacrifice. If you ask me, this is the kind of person that I will be really scared to be friends with, or much more, this is the kind of person that I will not mess around with. But before we turn our backs on Jesus because of his violent side, I would like to invite you to look at the context why this had to happen, and why this becomes a significant event in the Lenten journey.

In the ancient tradition, the temple is the place where the Jews perform their cleansing ceremonies. Let us look at their tradition, the ancient Jews are known to offer sacrifices as a form of their repentance, therefore cleansing. In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Leviticus contains all of the laws that God gave to the Israelites – more like their constitution. Sacrifice in the temple is a very important action for the Jews. If we are to look at this situation in the lens of tradition, there was nothing wrong with the whole scenario. First, 'church' regulations required that only money/coins that are to be used in buying the animals should not bear the face of Julius Caesar – the Roman emperor who were in power at the time of Jesus, so there was a need for the money changer. Second, there are rules governing the animals to be sacrificed. The people cannot just buy an animal in the market and offer it as a sacrifice, the animals have to be considered clean in the ancient Jewish standards, so it will be more convenient for them to just set up shop in the temple. This is why the religious leaders allowed this to happen in the first place. They were making sure that the people have accessibility and convenience as they perform the important ceremonies in their tradition. This will ensure that people will perform the required cleansing for themselves. This reminds me of the line from the movie 'Field of Dreams' – "If you build it, they will come", and this line eventually became a business idiom...and sometimes churches have fallen in this thinking, too. If you/we build it, people will come to the church, and they will become members. But let us go back to the importance of the elements of this scene. Practicality tells us that

what the religious allowed to happen in the temple is what the people needed to do. Additionally, this practice also allowed for the financial sustainability of the temple. So, really, if Jesus was to focus on the economic side of the temple, there was no reason for him to be angry about this. As a Jew, he is supposed to understand why there was a need to set up the tables for the animal sellers and for money changers.

We also know that Jesus is not to accept the tradition and status quo, especially if it is no longer applicable and life-giving. And as I reflect on this passage it makes me understand why Jesus reacted the way that he did upon entering the temple...not to mention how this became a reason for the religious leaders to be angrier with him, enough to want him killed. Because we are not reading and interpreting this passage literally, let us dig deeper into its message and contemplate how the message applies to our context. Here are some of my reflections:

1. As a Jew, Jesus was aware of the traditions. Primarily, he went to the temple to celebrate Passover, as any faithful Jew would do. But he was disappointed when he saw that the church leaders were more focused on the trading that was happening than people to be more focused on the worshipping God. For Jesus, worshipping God should be the priority.
2. It is no secret that under the Roman Empire, oppression was imminent in the land, and Jesus wanted to challenge the religious leaders to be prophetic – be instruments of justice to their current society. But that was not the case, instead, the religious leaders are concentrating on the tradition of selling animals and changing money.

What does that tell us? How do we see our own context in today's passage?

There is a phrase – 'what would Jesus do?'. According to Wikipedia, this phrase was taken from the book that was written in the late 1800s, then resurfaced in the 1990s as a strong for Christianity. It was mentioned in the Wikipedia article that this phrase was directly related to understanding the image of God (*imago Dei*) in the lives of the people. It was also mentioned that this phrase is tied to John Wesley's theology of Christian perfection – where we, the people embody the life and the teaching of Jesus as the reflection of the grace that we receive from God. Our society is facing a lot injustices. In the coming weeks, there will be a trial that will unfold before us, and we will be witnesses if the killing of George Floyd will be justified. We are seeing how God's creation is being mindlessly destroyed by our incessant consumption. We are witnessing how LGBTQ+ people are being discriminated because they are different – unfortunately the UMC is guilty of this. We are seeing persons of color being marginalized because of our skin color.

In closing, this is what I would like to leave to all of you. Are we going to stay in our comfort zones as the struggles of our society unfolds? Are we going to be a passive church who will let the world and time pass by? Or are we going to be the active church that will be prophetic in the midst of the struggles that our world is facing? What does it mean to be a prophetic church? Are we going to wait for Jesus to bring in the whip of cords to let us realize what we need to do? May it be so. Amen.