

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today we step into John's gospel. Between now and Pentecost, we'll hear a *lot* from this fourth gospel. As we make this transition, I'm reminded that John's gospel is markedly different from the others. John stresses Jesus's divinity. John is more spiritual, more theological, and, well (what's a nice way to put this), historical accuracy is not the emphasis. That's all because John is written to inspire the community to *maintain* their faith in difficult times—a community who *already* followed Christ. John is rich in symbolism and shades of meaning which are intended to deepen and illuminate faith—not necessarily to birth faith. As we spend time in John, we'll want to remember these things, and they are key to understanding today's story.

Now, the synoptic gospels, that is Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all have roughly the same components in comparison to John, but the synoptics separate John's narrative into two different moments *and* they put the story at the end of their gospels. Jesus flipping tables at the end of synoptic gospels becomes the catalyst for why the temple authorities want Jesus killed. But, for John, it's strategically placed in Chapter 2 at the beginning of Jesus's ministry.

You see, in John's gospel, today's episode follows the first miracle of Jesus, which was...anyone remember? It was turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Following the wedding, the next public act was disrupting the temple in today's story. This action sets the stage for Jesus's ministry in

John's gospel. Throughout the gospel, Jesus will disrupt the status quo. Jesus will challenge "business as usual." Today, Jesus challenged the temple systems. The system where people would pay exorbitant amounts of money as taxes and tithes to the temple. A system where the poor could not afford a sacrificial animal without going into debt.<sup>1</sup> A system where the temple practices had become a scheme that emphasized profits over people, that exploited rather than embraced, and that was exclusive instead of empowering. It was a system to which Jesus took great offense.

The way that Jesus responds, however, has been difficult for me to understand this week. Hearing that Jesus entered the temple and drove everything out, threw money on the floor, and overturned tables was jarring. It also confronts me in a new way following the destruction at the U.S. capitol on January 6. Thinking about those events, I cannot help but think about violent extremism. I also wonder about violence in pursuit of justice which can feel justified, and I ponder violence that is perpetuated by moral convictions. But some preachers want to minimize the violence and try to argue that Jesus was not violent, or that the whip (which was the same thing used to flog Jesus) was only for the sound, or that Jesus was only driving the animals out (which the Greek is clear that it was people too). It's true, we have very limited information here. It's also true that John's gospel isn't the most historically accurate (remember, that's not John's intent). These things make it complicated. At the same time, Jesus scattered property and committed economic violence as he strips moneychangers of their profits and products.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2937>

So, can we rationalize that Jesus is administering justice? Sure.

Can we pretend that his means are nonviolent? I don't think so.

Which begs a few questions, to which I have no answers:

First, is violence acceptable in certain circumstances?

Second, do I want to follow a leader who uses violent means of correction?

I have no easy answers.

Many faithful people, who are more intelligent than I, have wrestled with the question of violence and justice. A Lutheran pastor in Germany named Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with this question, and he eventually did use violent means to attempt an assassination against Adolf Hitler. So too, Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights leaders struggled with what type of violence, if any, was acceptable. I have no answer, but I want to name the disturbing picture painted of Jesus that feels at odds with Jesus's overall message.

And, we know Jesus was fully human with all the emotion that comes along with it. I understand Jesus's frustration. After all, we see that same system reveal its ugly head. Some charge fees for baptisms, require tithes before Communion, or push a pastor's new book. So too, our secular systems value profits and power more than people and peace. // As has widely been reported, during the pandemic when many have struggled, the top 10 richest billionaires have seen their wealth grow by \$540 billion. And, according to Oxfam, almost every country in the world will see an increase in inequality

due to the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> And Jesus took issue with this system. The system of status quo, and the system of same-old same-old. The systems that are ill-aligned with God's vision, it's these systems that Jesus wants to disrupt.

And, Jesus disrupted those systems to better reveal a truth about our God. We heard that truth when Jesus explained his actions in the second part of today's reading. There, Jesus reminded us that God's presence is not in bricks and mortar. Rather, God's presence is in Christ; God's presence is among us; God's presence is in you and in me. And, in John's gospel, we'll go on to hear this articulated time and again. In this gospel, Jesus is working to open us up to a new way of thinking, doing, and understanding.

And, in the midst of yet another Lent and Easter season gathered virtually, I need that reminder. I need the reminder that God is not found in the building at 1500 N Hoyne Ave. Rather, God is found among us on YouTube, Zoom, and Facebook; God is found with us at home, work, and on walks; God is found working through phone calls, cards, and texts; God is limitless and pervasive in our lives.

With that reminder, I invite you to join me in looking for the glimpses of God in the weeks ahead. With the disruption of church life, what have we learned? How have we seen God show up as we love our neighbors? Where are we being called in this time and place? In the next few months, you will begin to hear about our discernment campaign as a part of our Looking Forward strategic goals. That time of discernment will be an opportunity for us to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/world-s-richest-become-wealthier-during-covid-pandemic-inequality-grows-n1255506>

gather in small groups to discuss our congregation's values and how/where God is leading us in this time and place. It's a time to discern and listen together. It's a time to get back to the basics of our faith—to cast out that which limits God's action, and to welcome in what emphasizes God's vision for the world.

This is the same work that we undertake during the season of Lent. We gather to meditate before service, to center ourselves in God's gifts of self-examination, repentance, fasting, prayer, sacrificial giving, and works of love. So too, we gather on Thursdays to examine our lives and to draw ourselves into alignment with God's vision. We walk together through these 40 days towards God's gift of new life.

So, friends, I'm going to leave us here today. Here with the reminder that God is with you, and God is with us. A reminder that God is bringing something new into being, even if we're not sure what. So, come with me to the table to be fed by God for this holy journey. Walk with me as we look at what God gives and we have our hearts and minds opened to God's presence. Join me as we continue our journey through these 40 days. Amen.