

*Reconsidering Foolish and Weak
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan – March 7, 2021*

*Please read:
I Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22*

What is the first image that comes to mind when you think of Jesus? Unless you've just read today's gospel text, I'd bet the image you have is quite domesticated. Most of us picture Jesus as serene and passive. We remember his call to love your neighbor and love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. We think of his hands as strong to heal and restore, but not violent. I don't believe I've ever seen a stained-glass window of Jesus turning over tables in the Temple! He is usually depicted gently holding a lamb, or passively standing outside a locked door...

But today's gospel text shows a very different side of Jesus: Here is portrayed the *zeal* of the Lord! This word *zeal* in the Greek (*zelos*) literally means "boiling" ... John writes the disciples remembered Psalm 69:9 "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me." Zeal is the same root word for the term *Zealot*, for one who is passionate, who has a fire in them around an issue or a cause. Jesus had a passion for the Temple, the gathering point for all people to pray and worship.

It's important to remember *when* this scene happened. John writes that "The Passover of the Jews was near..." That meant that this violent scene where Jesus made a whip and drove all of the animals and moneychangers out of the temple took place just before the Jewish equivalent of Easter Sunday, the High Holiday. The Passover continues to be the main Jewish holiday when Jews around the world remember and celebrate the Exodus, the liberation, the freeing of the Hebrew slaves from their bondage in Egypt. The temple would have been absolutely full of people coming from around the Roman empire. It was a time for people to come to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings as an act of worship and preparation for worship on Passover.

A powerful religious institution and a complex system of money exchange had evolved over the years because only pure silver temple coins could be used to purchase animals and grains for sacrifice. It was not so much the quality of the metal, but it was considered sacrilegious to use money in the temple that bore that the images of earthly kings, emperors, or other rulers. That would have been blasphemous for the Jews who wanted to acknowledge that there is only one God over them.... Given Passover, and that people from around the known world were coming to get ready for worship, the temple would have been full of both a diversity of people as well as the various animals waiting to be sold and then used as burnt offerings for worship.

It's also important though to remember *where* this scene took place. Our reading just says "the temple" but in fact we know there were different courts of the Temple, and this scene would have taken place in what was known as the Court of the Gentiles, the outer courtyard just after the entrance.¹ This was a place for *all* people to come and worship. I think this is significant.

Jesus was making a powerful and prophetic statement here by clearing out the temple. He was making at least two points, one negative and one positive. The first was that the religious machinery of the day had completely distorted and disfigured the worship of God. The sacrifice

¹ Referenced Thursday, March 06, 2021: <http://theflamingheretic.wordpress.com/2007/11/29/john-213-22-cleansing-the-temple/>

system was obsolete. He compares himself to the temple. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” is a thinly veiled reference to himself. His Jewish audience wondered how he would rebuild Herod’s Temple in three days (when it had been under construction for “46 years”), but Jesus was referring to himself as the temple... True worship was not through fussy religious rituals, but through actions of God’s self-giving love and justice that his life, death, and resurrection would reveal. This is a primary message of Jesus’ clearing the temple area. *Pay attention*, he was saying, *I’m going to change everything!*

Secondly, and this is really just a corollary to the first, Jesus he was making it clear that *the worship of God is for all people*. That’s the significance of this act in the Court of the Gentiles. In Isaiah 56:7 God says, “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Jesus is passionate about this because it is an issue of justice, an issue of exclusion of the outsiders. Paradoxically, the religious machinery of his day had managed both to enslave the Jewish people to a system of sacrifice that made the temple a “marketplace,” and at the same time turned the place reserved for the Gentiles into a noisy mall for merchants, anything but a house of prayer...

Our second text is one of my favorites, because it reminds us that sometimes God’s wisdom looks like foolishness to our way of thinking, and sometimes God’s strength looks like weakness to us. The pairing of these texts in the lectionary is fascinating to me. Here we have the most “muscular” portrayal of Jesus as we see anywhere in the gospel accounts. He is physical and he is strong, single-handedly turning over tables and driving out large animals and what we can imagine would be an angry crowd of merchants... But either way, he is clearly making enemies of the religious leaders of the day, upsetting the way the temple worship machinery was supposed to operate. It’s not a coincidence that in the other three gospels this scene is set just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and before his arrest. It was the final act that led him to the cross for Jesus. Perhaps John is making the bold assertion from the very beginning of his account of the life of Jesus that *this* Lord and Savior will immediately confront the powers and principalities of our way of doing faith. He will overturn the tables and the systems of operations of our finely tuned religious traditions and assumptions.

Which leaves us with the question: How smart are we about doing what the Lord requires of us? How wise are we in giving God true worship? Are we living in the New Covenant, or the Old? Are we liberated in our worship of God and offering God true worship through holy and just living, caring for the widows, the orphans, the oppressed, the outsiders, the gentiles in our midst? There is a certain irony in that we have literally had to clear out the chairs of our sanctuary in order to make it safe for all people, but how are we clearing out the temple of our lives and life together for the newcomers, the young and the old who are looking for an encounter with the living God, and not just more religious to-do lists in life?

One of our friends from Paris recently relocated to New York City. Enuma Okoro is an author and has done a number of art review articles for the *Financial Times*. Recently she got some fan mail from a woman who said she appreciated that in each of Enuma’s articles, she includes something about faith and religion. It’s turning into a new ministry for Enuma. She said, everyone is searching for God. Unfortunately, most of the time, they don’t know it and don’t know where to go... Especially in this pandemic, people are desperate to connect with someone that will help them deal with the deep loneliness and void that isolation and quarantine has

revealed. As Leigh Stein observed in her most recent article in *the Times*, “our moral leaders aren’t challenging us to ask the fundamental questions that leaders of faith have been wrestling with for thousands of years: Why are we here? Why do we suffer? What should we believe in beyond the limits of our puny selfhood?”²

In a *Mental Health First Aid* course I learned one out of every five Americans experience some kind of mental health challenge in their lives. I was reminded that everyone needs someone who will listen to them without judging and affirm their basic dignity and worth as a human. We in the church are called to make space for the outsider, to re-center those on the margins. The question is, what does Jesus need to clear out in our lives or in our church so that we are truly a house of prayer for all people? “All people” means men and women, young and old, rich, and poor, straight, and gay, traditional, and contemporary, black, and white, insiders and outsiders, educated and uneducated, the social and the unsocial, the righteous and the unrighteous... and everyone in between...

But as Stein notes, God’s vision for our worship is much more than what we are doing in this sanctuary or even in the way we live our personal lives during the week. Gary Haugen’s book, *Just Courage: God’s Great Expedition for the Restless Christian* talks about how so many of us seem to be without zeal. Too many of us are just going through the motions. Haugen tells the story of when he and his father and brothers went hiking up Mount Rainer. When they got to Paradise Visitor’s Center, he opted to stay back while his father and older brothers went up Camp Muir, a base camp used by climbers. While they were hiking in the ice and snow, exhausting themselves with the adventure of getting to the base camp, he memorized wildflower names and learned the boring visitor’s center music by heart. It all seemed so interesting and exciting at first, but hours later he was bored out of his mind. Haugen compares this experience to the way many of us live our lives. Too many of us are trapped in the Visitor’s Center looking at pictures *of* the mountain but have never been out *on* the mountain!

Haugen wrote also about starting the International Justice Mission, a ministry committed to setting the captives free, wherever they are today. Did you know that 25,000 people die every day because of hunger? Did you know there are millions of slaves in the world today, many of them sex slaves because of the huge pornography industry... Gary Haugen and his associates believe that as Christians we are called to do something about it. Others are called to give witness to the gospel to those millions of people suffering from AIDS around the world. Or the estimated 79.5 million forcibly displaced persons, 30 – 34 million of whom are children... Gary would ask us: Do you have any *zeal* about the suffering of so many people in the world?

Today marks the 56th anniversary of Bloody Sunday when John Lewis and others marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge from Selma toward Birmingham as a peaceful demonstration for voting rights. They were brutally beaten by the state police. I believe that’s what inspired some of our own members here to go and march a couple of weeks later. Sometimes, just showing up is the most courageous thing anyone can do. People of color are still having to fight

² Leigh Stein, “The Empty Religions of Instagram,” (*The New York Times*, March 5, 2021), referenced March 6, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/opinion/influencers-glennon-doyle-instagram.html?smid=em-share>

for voting rights, or as the trial around the death of George Floyd reminds us, for basic civil rights, to just live without fear...

I believe Jesus and some of his faithful witnesses remind us that we really can make a difference. Walk the labyrinth. Share food. Remember Selma. Cut a big check for *One Great Hour of Sharing*, or the MLK church. Come to this table today.... hungry for justice for all of our siblings. Surely, we need to rethink what is wise and what is foolish... and what is weak and what is strong. Perhaps we need to consider again what needs to get cleaned up and cleared out of the temple of our lives and life together? Because let's face it... There are a lot of *believers* in Jesus. But Jesus is looking for *disciples*. People who will actually follow him all the way to the summit of the cross and Easter New Life. Not just for ourselves, but for the world.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.