

Sermon – Flipping the Tables on Injustice – March 3, 2024 – Stephanie L. Hare

Scripture passages: Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

Lord, send your Spirit to be with us as we study your Word. Let your wisdom descend upon our ears and your message on our hearts as we contemplate your scripture this day. Amen.

Whenever I hear a reading of the Ten Commandments, I am immediately transported back to the summer when I was nine years old and I was in Vacation Bible School. That summer, the theme for VBS was the story of the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt as they made their way from slavery to the Land of Canaan. Each day of the week of VBS, we explored one section of the story of the Hebrew people's journey. At the end of the week, we sang songs and acted out the story for an audience of our parents and other family members. One of the best parts of that presentation for me, was that my group, which was the "older" kids, got to pantomime a very dramatic drowning scene, as we portrayed the Egyptian army being caught up in the waves of the Red Sea. The waves being portrayed by the littlest kids flapping a sheet up and down in front of the gathered congregation.

Our VBS was an ecumenical program, which was somewhat novel for the time. There were kids from my home Presbyterian church, a few Methodists, a couple of Lutherans, and a number of kids from the Episcopal Church where VBS was being held, then known as St. Paul's on the Hill. And as it was ecumenical, each of the pastors of the respective cooperating churches took one day of the week to be the presenter of that day's part of the epic story of the Israelites to each of the groups of kids.

Now, as many of you may know, or not, my dad was a pastor which meant of course, my dad was one of the presenters. The part of the story that was my dad's day to lead, was the creation of the golden calf. So on that day, when it was our turn, my group moseyed on down to the sanctuary of St Paul's church and listened as my dad told us the story. We were then invited as a group to all stand up and reenact the story around the sanctuary's communion table. My dad played the role of Moses leaving the Israelites in the care of his brother Aaron, a role he assigned to one of the kids in my group, as Moses was to travel up the mountain to talk to God and receive the 10 Commandments. So, being good little VBS students, we dutifully went about reenacting the story, bidding farewell to our leader, Moses, pretending to get scared without him, and then as a result of our terror, creating that infamous false idol to worship and bring us comfort.

We kids were so into our own little reenactment, that we did not notice that my dad left the room. That is, until the moment that my dad reappeared, hovering over us from the choir loft of the sanctuary and yelling at us completely in character as an enraged Moses at the top of his lungs, "Children of Israel, what are you doing?" Let me tell you. It scared the daylights out of everyone gathered around that imaginary golden calf. Lifespans were shortened that day.

I should note here that my dad at his full height was 6 foot 2, broad shouldered, with a full head of steel gray hair, and a Basso Profundo voice that was not just deep, it was also very, very loud when he wanted it to be. To make things even more dramatic, when he had snuck out of the room, he had slipped into a long white choir robe and when he appeared on that choir loft balcony, I swear he was glowing like Moses himself after meeting with God.

If we remembered nothing else that week, we would remember “making idols: bad”

Now lest you think I was the only one affected so strongly by this dramatic and superior scolding, 10 years later, I was a college student working a summer job at our local public library and a woman came up to the counter to check out her books. She recognized me before I her, and she said, “aren’t you Rev. Hare’s daughter?” Now, when you are a pastor’s kid and you spend any number of years living in the same town where your parent serves a church, this kind of greeting is a very, very regular occurrence. So I internally sighed then cheerfully said yes. The woman introduced herself and mentioned being a member of St. Paul’s and I suddenly recognized her as a parent volunteer from VBS of many years back. I said something like, “oh I remember you! You ran the Arts and Crafts room.” And she excitedly said, “Yes! That was me. Do you remember that day that your father dressed up like Moses and scared the daylights out of everyone in the building? My kids and I still talk about that.” Yep. I remember.

The act of remembering plays an interesting role in our Gospel passage today. In this reading from the book of John, Jesus’ disciples remember things at two different moments – at one point they are in the thick of the action of the story and are remembering a verse of a Psalm and connect it to the action taking place in front of them. Then after all is said and done – as in after the death and resurrection of Jesus – the author of John tells us that the disciples remembered this moment in the Temple. Both of these moments of “remembering” are part of the Disciples process in connecting the dots in order to understand the meaning of what Jesus had said and did.

The story here is quite the dramatic one, especially as told in John’s Gospel. There are versions of the removal of the vendors and money changers in all four of our Gospels, but the one we read here today is by far the most descriptive and has an extra element of violence to it, as it is the only version of the story in which Jesus yields a whip.

In reading through pages and pages of commentaries on this passage and even watching a real time discussion of the nuances of translation from the Greek text into English online, it seemed critically important to many theologians and pastors, including pastor Bruce Gillette writing in the Presbyterian Outlook, to clarify the point that Jesus did not make and use that whip on people – that is was only used as a tool to drive the larger animals – the sheep and cattle – out of the Temple, as one might do if one were on a cattle drive on the open range. There are translations of the text that have inspired images throughout the centuries of Jesus actually whipping at the vendors and money changers themselves, but that is an image that seems to defy the very teachings of Jesus himself.

Even if we were to leave the whip out of the story entirely, as the authors of Matthew, Mark, and Luke do, this story is no less a complicated one to process. As I mentioned in my Tidings article in Friday’s email to the congregation, the thing about this story that I have always been fascinated by and find even a little bit relatable is that Jesus is super angry in this story... about something.

Interestingly, what Jesus is angry about is not clearly spelled out for us. Even by John’s author who in verses 21 and 22 is intent on their readers really understanding Jesus’ divinity and the incarnational nature of God and the Holy Spirit as manifested in the body of Jesus. Like, ok, John, we get it, you’re really into the Christology of the scriptures, but seriously, what was Jesus so mad about?

On a very cursory reading of this text, one could quickly walk away from this story thinking that the problem for Jesus was that there was commerce going on in the Temple and that this was just bad. But a little context and history tells us that the selling of animals for sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem was a daily and necessary part of the worship practices of the time, as well as part of what helped pay to keep the Temple functioning.

The Temple in Jerusalem at this time is the center of Jewish existence in the world. It is a massive complex with different areas designated for different sacred activities. It is the place where people make their pilgrimages during important religious festivals. Our story today tells us that people were preparing for Passover at this time, so the Temple would have been bustling with activity, filled with locals, pilgrims, and tourists alike. And these vendors of sacrificial livestock and the moneychangers, there to take foreign coin and convert it to the local currency necessary for the faithful to pay their offering to the Temple, would have been quite busy.

So what is it that raises the ire of Jesus about all this? Some modern-day folks speculate that the vendors were engaging in price gouging, or that the money changers were skimming off their exchanges more than they should have been.

Some folks think that the location of the merchants' tables were the problem. Many scholars say that the area of the Temple in which the table flipping occurred was in what was known as the Court of the Gentiles, an area that was designated to be a place of welcome and prayer for people visiting the Temple who weren't even of the Jewish faith. These folks posit that Jesus was upset that the vendors were taking space away or acting as obstacles to the welcome of the Gentiles into the Temple.

Some folks theorize that the real problem was the relationship between the Temple and its leadership with the occupying Roman authorities. The Jews living under Roman rule were allowed to practice their religion and engage in their traditional practices, but not without some very present influence from the local powers that be – including that moneys collected by the Temple were paid up the line to the Roman authorities to fund their own agendas.

There is not one clear answer to the question, “what was Jesus so mad about?” immediately and obviously available in the text. But you know what? I'm ok with that. There's a critical value in the wrestling with difficult texts in the Bible that don't always have easy, pat answers. Being willing to explore, ask questions, consult multiple sources, get into it over translations of Greek words in a Facebook group on the internet, engage in healthy dialogue with a friend or colleague, these are all worthwhile pursuits in helping us continue to delve deeper into the meaning of these texts in order to discover how to apply them to our lives today.

We read, we re-read, and then sometimes we remember something we heard or read in scripture at some other time which suddenly resonates differently than it did before.

As I was reading again and again about doves and sheep and cattle and sacrifices, I was reminded of one of my other favorite Biblical passages from the prophet Micah. Micah 6:8 is one that is familiar to many and often gets truncated down to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” Not a bad message at all, but when we pull back just a little to give us a bit more of the passage, it takes on another level of meaning. Micah 6:6-8 reads:

6 “With what shall I come before the Lord

and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,

with calves a year old?

7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,

the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good,

and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice and to love kindness

and to walk humbly with your God?

I love the fact that this passage is written as one big question and even ends with a question mark. Not an exclamation point, not a period, but a question mark. Now to be clear, this punctuation could very likely have been added by transcribers and translators after the original text was written, but that’s still ok by me. Sometimes in life, there are answers in the questions and sometimes there are questions in the answers.

The key take away for me from both our passage from John and from Micah is that ritual is important; sacrifice is important; tradition is important. All of it is important, as long as it points us back to the fundamentals. And that’s what Jesus is always telling us to do – the most important thing is to love God, love our neighbors, to devote ourselves to justice, and to show mercy. To allow traditions and practices to get in the way of ourselves or others experiencing the love of God is to create a false idol; one that might give us short term satisfaction when we are anxious and doing “something” feels better than doing nothing, but in the long term sets us as individuals and as a community further away from knowing true Shalom – the peace of God, wholeness, the way things are supposed to be.

So, if you remember nothing else today, remember, idols: bad. Questions: good. Shalom: that’s the goal.

Amen