

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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WWJT? What Would Jesus Trash?

Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the merchants and their customers. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those selling doves.

– Matthew 21:12-16

There isn't much that really gets my blood boiling. Normally, I am a pretty even-keeled person. There have only been a few times I have really gotten seriously angry. There was the time when I was a kid and one of my friends was pulling my hair and would not let go. That time I lost my temper. I get annoyed when people are unreasonable, and I have encountered a few people like that in my day. But more and more, what really angers me is not my own personal experiences of being treated unfairly. It is the ways I witness others being treated unfairly. There was the time in Guatemala that the driver of a bus drove away, abandoning two Indigenous women on the side of the road while their children were still on the bus. There are the people I know who are being dragged through the courts unfairly and who are suffering horrible financial problems because of what can only be termed legal abuse. There are the Facebook trolls who inflict casual cruelties in their thoughtless responses to others. There are those who are so convinced of their own point of view that they are quite scathing in their contempt for those who disagree. There are those who are quite prepared to sacrifice the natural environment to their economic self-interest. There are those who get treated very differently because of their skin colour or ethnic heritage. It makes me angry that poor, vulnerable and powerless people are treated so callously by the "system": the way in which bureaucracies casually humiliate the powerless; the way in which the needs of the poor are systematically ignored by an economic system in which those without money simply don't count.

If anything, I should get angry more than I do. Because there are a lot of things unfair in the world, lots of reasons to be angry, and the fact that I don't get angry about them is a sign that I am more callous than God wants me to be. Which leads me to the question for the day: "What would Jesus trash? What makes Jesus angry? What gets his blood boiling?" Because if there are things that make Jesus mad, and they don't

make us mad too, how can we call ourselves his followers? Tony Campolo once pointed out that Jesus saved us so that our hearts would be broken by the same things that break his heart. In the same way, I want to suggest today, Jesus saved us so that the things that make his blood boil, will arouse in us a righteous indignation so overpowering that we simply cannot tolerate them going on any longer.

We often think of a meek and mild Jesus, but today's reading portrays him rather as quite the opposite. He is quite fierce in his condemnation of the way in which the temple had become a place of institutional violence against the poor. By Jesus' time, the temple had become a giant money-sucking machine that dispensed forgiveness and social respectability, for a price. The whole system, the merchants who sold animals for sacrifice, the moneychangers who converted common currency, which was considered unclean, into the "pure" temple shekels which could be used to pay for the animals and compensate the priests – the whole system was designed to enrich the priests at the expense of ordinary people. In the process, it made the high priests into the wealthiest and most powerful people in the country. They were major landowners, collaborators with the Roman occupiers, and so had a deep vested interest in maintaining things the way they were – maintaining a deeply unjust social order.

Jesus is not impressed. The very first thing he does, according to Matthew's gospel, after entering the city on Palm Sunday, is to trash the temple. He drives out all the merchants and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. Quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah, he says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves." But this is no spontaneous act of anger. Rather it is a carefully planned prophetic act, a demonstration, an act of civil disobedience by which Jesus and his companions challenge what most people assume is normal. Just as Ghandi challenged the moral authority of the British Empire by making salt and Martin Luther King challenged the normality of racism by leading a march across a bridge in Birmingham, Alabama, Jesus' action in the temple is a carefully thought out prophetic act that challenges the legitimacy of the normal operation of the temple. It arises from a deep sense of anger - holy anger, moral indignation, and righteous outrage – but it is thoroughly thought-through and carefully planned.

if you watch any film on a religious theme this Easter or any time of year, I recommend *Jesus of Montreal*, by Canadian filmmaker Denys Arcand. In that film, there is a modern retelling of the story of Jesus disrupting the temple. the Jesus figure

goes to pick up an actress friend who is working on a beer commercial and is so outraged by the way she is casually humiliated and exploited that he trashes the TV studio, upsetting cameras and sound equipment.

What, I wonder, would arouse such passion in Jesus today? What do we treat as normal that really should arouse our moral indignation and righteous outrage? What would Jesus trash?

What would Jesus trash if he came into your home? Would he overturn the television set and toss around the video consoles, challenging the dominance of passive entertainment over our family life? Would he find a way to disrupt and expose the constant criticism that is so common in families? Would he challenge the way we treat each other with casual contempt, breeding resentment while it undermines self-esteem? What would Jesus trash if he came to your home?

What would Jesus trash if he came to our community? Would it be the single-family dwellings which keep our families isolated from one another, which keep the well-fed and the hungry separated from each other? Would it be the lodges, schools and the day care centres which keep the generations apart? What would he trash if he came to our community?

What would Jesus trash if he came to our church? Would he trash our attractive sanctuary and beautiful music and point out the way in which we complacently alienate the young people, especially young men, who aren't engaged by our style of worship? Would he challenge the respectable religion that looks to meet our spiritual needs without engaging the harder moral and spiritual questions of our times?

What would Jesus trash if he came to our nation? Would he disrupt the election forums and television attack ads that emphasize trivial questions and trivialize vital ones? Would he be joining aboriginal people on the barricades to protest our failure to achieve a truly just society? Would he be chaining himself to trees or opposing economic developments that threaten climate stability?

What would Jesus trash if he came to our world? Would he be leading mass pilgrimages from poor slums in protest over the vast discrepancies between wealth and power in our world? Would he disrupt stock exchanges in protest of the pursuit of

profit without morality and commerce without principle?

The story goes that Jesus did not just trash the temple, but made it a place of healing. The temple was a place of purity. Only the best was good enough for God, but what that meant in practice was that people who were impure, disabled in some way, were not allowed into the temple. The assumption was that such people were cursed by God, and for them to be in God's presence in the temple would make the temple unclean. But in driving out the merchants and the money-changers, Jesus is saying that it isn't the lame and the blind who make the temple unclean, but the focus on purity which ends up excluding some of God's people. This story is traditionally called the story of the cleansing of the temple, because it makes clear that the things we often assume are keeping our holy places clean and pure are in fact making them dirty and impure.

So after cleansing the temple, the disciples presumably went and invited in all those who had previously been excluded. When Jesus heals the lame and the blind, in the temple, he is challenging this ancient practice of exclusion, saying that the temple is for those who need God, not just for those who are worthy of God. So perhaps this story challenges us to think about who is excluded and unwelcome here in our congregation, and who is excluded and marginalized in our community. If Jesus were to cleanse this place, and then send his disciples – you and me – out to invite those who need God the most, to whom would the invitation go? --- Think about that: who needs to be invited into God's gracious presence? Who? ---

Perhaps you are the one who never felt entirely at home, and who needs to be invited. Perhaps you are the disciple who needs to go out and issue that invitation. Perhaps you are both. Perhaps the best invitation comes from those who most cherish being guests at the feast of grace, "one hungry beggar telling another where to find bread."