

What Would Jesus Do?

John 2:13-22

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Preached March 5, 2018 at Grace Baptist Church, Norwalk

It is wonderful to be here. I love that our congregations have been in relationship for over 10 years. Now more than ever, with so many divisions in our country, and so many wounds which still need healing, we NEED to nurture this relationship between our two congregations.

I am grateful to your pastor, Rev. Curtis, and Janis Curtis, GBC's staff and your wonderful congregation for your hospitality this morning.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it deals with very human situations and people who feel the gamut of emotions. While we may not face the exact circumstances the Biblical characters faced, as fellow human beings, we **can** relate to the feelings expressed.

There are stories of celebrations: weddings, love, rites of passage and accomplishment. There are stories of tragedy: murder, sexual abuse and incest, adultery. And there are stories about every type of relationship... friendships between men with men, women with women, men with women; and familial relationships as well. There are stories exhibiting every human emotion: joy, sadness, peacefulness, anger, jealousy, despair and hope. You name it, it's there.

Thank goodness for that, because the scriptures can provide some solace for us in these days. We live in a state of heightened emotion right now, don't we? We live in a society which is full of outrage, no matter who you support politically. You can't turn on any news station or read any newspaper, or even talk to your friends where there isn't someone who is outraged about something. We no longer just get angry as a normal response when we feel a boundary is crossed or something is wrong. We are driven over the top because it's just that bad on many fronts, and depending whom you talk to, it has been for a long time. And people are fed up.

A wise person once told me that people raise their voices when they feel they aren't heard. There are a lot of voices which aren't being heard, or which haven't been heard or ignored for decades, even centuries by the people who have the institutional or positional power. And now, some of those voices are finally beginning to get a hearing. We have seen that in the Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo movements, and now with the Gun Control debate.

Friends, when people become comfortable with the structure of systems, we can fail to see what God is trying to do in our midst. Throughout history, it has been the people who are not benefitting from the system, those on the margins of society, who have created the need for change and who have helped society move forward.

American novelist and social critic James Baldwin said something which could have been a quote from Jesus himself: "If I love you, I have to make you conscious of things you don't see."

The message of the Gospel this morning is that Jesus upends systems which can easily be corrupted. Jesus shakes things up when we don't see the truth right in front of us. This is a scary message to some who have held power, and a liberating message to those who have longed for justice.

Let's examine that scene that day in John chapter 2. In the Gospel of John, this story occurs right after the first miracle of the wedding at Cana. Jesus saves the day by turning water into wine. In that culture, having enough

wine for your guests was a symbol that you took care of them. So, this act allowed the hospitality of the host to remain intact. Contrast that story to our text this morning when Jesus went into the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, even whipping anyone around and you get a whole different picture of the very human Jesus. The other three Gospels place this story as the final act before Jesus is condemned. In John, the raising of Lazarus is the last straw. So what was John trying to say here?

First of all, it was Passover, which meant that many had travelled to their hometowns and the temple would have been a very busy place. Second, the merchandising of goods had become a normal practice for them and seen as an essential. "The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures. Jesus is not quibbling about maleficence or mismanagement but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system," according to theologian Karoline Lewis, PhD.

Imagine how any of us would feel like if someone claiming authority came in and started challenging the well-put-together system which allowed for the financing of mandatory sacrifices. That is extremely frightening news for those who counted on things remaining the same as they had been. It doesn't make them bad, it makes them unable at that moment to accept a new way of life. Jesus was never concerned with upsetting the proverbial apple cart, however. His message always brought/brings a new and life-giving angle which overturns the ways things have been and makes room for resurrection.

In that story, Jesus was pointing to a new way to view where God's presence was...not in a building or in rituals, but in following him. Later he says, "I am the way the truth and the life." He was essentially saying, *I am the living Torah*, the embodiment of it all. That was a mind-bending truth.

I wonder what it would have been like to have been there that day. Would I have shrunk and watched in fear at the power of this angry man or would I have cheered him on? And would I have been one of those who was part of the "system" trying to keep the carefully constructed status quo in place by making a buck to make ends meet or would I be part of wanting to see things in a new way? If I'm honest, I really don't know. How about you?

So, how is this applicable to us today? Let's take 3 modern day scenarios where the tables have or are beginning to be overturned and ask what Jesus would do so that we can recognize God's presence in our midst.

Let's look at the issue of white privilege and institutionalized racism. For you here at Grace, this is more of a confessional than anything else. For this point, I'm speaking to those of us who are Caucasian here, myself included. Friends, in case if it's never been pointed out to you, every system in our society is built upon white privilege from the inside out. It's so insidious that people don't even know it's part of the cellular level of everything we do and say. White people get things merely by being white. You add education and wealth to it, and the playing field becomes very lopsided.

When you are treated differently; when people make assumptions about you-- who you are, what your background is, if you're dangerous or not, if you're honest based on the color of your skin-- you're dealing with racism and white privilege.

In her book, *Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, Debby Irving courageously takes a look back through her life in the Irish Catholic suburbs of Boston and reveals how the concept of race didn't even occur to her. Then, one day she was awakened and saw her life through a totally different lens. "Racism holds all of us captive in ways white people rarely imagine," she says.

In a similar way to Debby Irving, my colleague Rev. Jonah Smith-Bartlett did a 30 day reflection piece of Examining White Privilege in My Life. Here are three short entries:

Day 2-In the majority of cases- in the three institutions of higher learning that I attended, the theories, writings, philosophies, theologies, and thoughts of people who looked like me made up the syllabi of required courses.

The theories, writings, philosophies, theologies, and thoughts of people of color were taught in elective courses.

That is to say- I could choose to listen to the stories of people of color. I could also choose to keep them silent.

Day 8:

...I am (also) the beneficiary of a “free pulpit”, even if that word isn’t used.

I am safe there. I’m sure that the people in the congregation don’t always agree with my thoughts but they always welcome them and I am blessed to have those relationships.

I am unafraid to discuss theology but also poverty, injustice, gender, sexuality...

And race. And the messages are thematic, because the faith is thematic...

Grace Love Justice Liberation I recognize that these themes-

Grace, Love, Justice, and Liberation-

have been themes of movements for racial equality, reconciliation, and empowerment

for far longer than I have been alive.

AND

I recognize that my themes from the free pulpit in the predominantly white Protestant church are often met with hope and joy.

I recognize that their themes... from the protest lines of people who are black and the front lines of people of color... are often met with animosity and fear.

Day 16: We who are white have, above all, the privilege to stay silent.

But as the old adage rightly goes- silence is deafening.

<https://medium.com/human-development-project/one-month-examining-white-privilege-97d76500740c>

Jesus has been overturning the tables for years here...will those of us who are white become awakened during the overturning of the tables to see the presence of God in our midst in order to experience resurrection? We’ve got lots of work to do.

Next, let’s look at the issue of Sexual Harassment and Abuse. The #METOO movement has surfaced as a result of a system in place since the beginning of time which values the power of men to use women as objects for their pleasure regardless of consent. These acts are not about lust or love, they are about power and the need to exert it. And sexual abuse has been prevalent in every type of industry...including in the church. Yes, when those in power become enamored with that power, abuse can and most probably will occur.

Enter Jesus...toppling over the tables and saying...this prideful behavior for men AND the women who may be stuck in shame and silence...must stop. Just as Jesus spoke with the woman at the well, and had close friends who were women throughout his ministry—much to the surprise and consternation of his disciples—he upturned the way men and women related to each other-- even in his patriarchal society. He still does today--

All of this to show God's presence in our lives as one who creates women and men, people of every nation and race as equal children of God.

Finally in the debate over Gun Regulations...is this the time the tables are overturning to allow fresh ways of relating to one another? People seem so entrenched in their stances, but it's been the unexpected voices...those of students which have emerged as the fresh voice of change.

Mad Money's Jim Cramer interview on Friday night with Chuck Todd said that he had met with 100 of the top companies this week and for the first time CEO's said they were taking actions in particular in response to the Parkland Florida shooting because of the anger and demand of their employees. They said they listened to the feelings of their employees more than customers, the NRA and even their shareholders. They listened to their employees and made changes.

Friends, we live in a society built on systems. Systems in and of themselves are not bad...but the call here is to not be so attached to the way things are or how they have been that we miss out of the presence of God in our midst who longs to bring resurrection out of what needs to die.

This is a season of reflection, of turning, of repentance, of forgiveness...We have the advantage of knowing how this ends. When we let go of death-dealing ways, we find inevitable resurrection. Glory to God!

Come, Lord Jesus! Come.

Amen...