

Scripture: Mark 11:15-17

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; **16** and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

17 He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written,

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?

But you have made it a den of robbers.’

Sermon: Was THAT Really Necessary?

I have to admit. I really like this story. It’s a story about Jesus kicking butt. As a person who was a strong individual single woman for 29 years before getting married, I like this side of Jesus. This seems to be the only story of Jesus where his actions reflect the feeling of disappointment in God’s creation. It’s the anger that we all expect from humanity. Jesus is finally just like us. Now, while I wouldn’t flip tables, I appreciate the sentiment of trying to get a point across. After all, Jesus the semi-patient teacher showed that he wasn’t doing all of his work for nothing.

Researchers of this biblical text have found that this story has impacted many in different ways. One biblical commentator wrote, “Jesus’ action in the Temple has inspired numerous political interpretations in our time. Some allege that it legitimates Christian attempts to unseat corrupt regimes, especially those whose power is supported by religious leaders who ignore the abuses of human rights by the wealthy, powerful majority. Others have used this passage in debates with Christians who oppose war, claiming that Jesus’ behavior in the Temple shows that he accepted a legitimate role for violence. Both views go too far.” The commentator argues that it’s not about either of those things. Friends, this is not the point of the story.

It also isn’t another example of Jesus’s all-powerful nature. You see, for any of Jesus’s actions to matter in the Temple, others would have had to recognize that Jesus had power in the Temple in the first place. And that’s not the only criteria. Many believe that the historical significance of this encounter is not strong. This interaction wouldn’t have affected many people or lives. This may leave us wondering. What is the point then?

What may be most important is what Jesus said. Our scripture tells us that Jesus taught after he overturned the tables, saying, “Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers.” In these words, Jesus pointed to two prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah.?

In the book of Isaiah chapter 56, Isaiah shared God’s word about welcoming all in. Now, I know we’ve talked about this idea multiple times within this sermon series, but listen to these prophesied words, “And the foreigners (all non-Judah people) who join themselves to the LORD...hold fast my covenant—**7** these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” To the people of Judah, God showed a character that they hadn’t seen. God opened God’s table, as it said in Isaiah “to all people.” And not just for the sake of it, but to be a house for prayer, a place of solitude, a place of safety in all processing. God’s table or the temple, in this case, was intended to be a place of healing.

Then, in Jeremiah 7, we hear God’s warning. We read in verse 3, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.” God goes on to speak through Jeremiah, “**8** Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. **9** Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely...and go after other gods that you have not known, **10** and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are safe!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? **11** Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.”

In Isaiah, a half a century before Jeremiah, we see our God showcasing the acceptance and love of all those who wish to be in relationship. Then, in Jeremiah we see a warning of misuse of relationship. You see, the incident at God’s temple in Jesus’s time was not the first time that people had stepped away from their devotion to God. In fact, these words from Jesus and the book of Jeremiah are even more traumatic than we realize.

The phrase “den of robbers” is not the most accurate translation of what was said. In fact, the word that we translate as “robber” is not really what was meant. The word refers to a brigand, or a member of a gang that ambushes and robs people in forests and mountains. So, instead of us thinking these people that God is addressing as robbers (those who steal with or without force), there is much more damage that is done.

When I learned about a brigand, I immediately thought about Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan. In the beginning of the story, in Luke 10, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of “robbers”, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.” It makes me wonder was Jesus alluding to the people in the temple who were selling and buying as those who would leave God beaten and half dead? Had the temple become a place of lack of safety, lack of healing? When it came down to it, the temple was no longer the place that God intended it to be.

All throughout the sermon series, we have been looking at all being welcome at God’s table. We’ve looked at refocusing our view to something broader. We’ve explored what it means to have belonging as well as taking risks to establish that belonging. We’ve been encouraged to slow down and listen by being present with those around us. We’ve looked at our own inclusivity, and whether we are inviting all to the table. Last week, we even talked about how stories at the table shape us.

Today, we get to the most important questions of all: Is Jesus sitting at our table? Is the loving, compassionate, norm-shaker, and truth-teller, sitting with us at our table? And if Jesus is sitting at the table, does he have a voice at it? Is the character of Jesus exhibited by our words and actions at the table?

Ok. So that was a lot of questions, and a lot of self-awareness to be aware of at the table. Let’s try it this way.

Jesus flipped over tables, and taught from the Old Testament about humanity's failure to see the beauty in God’s table, God’s space. Was the flipping of tables necessary to make the point? Honestly, who knows. What we can understand, though, is God’s intention to provide a space of healing and community.

We, as Reedsburg UMC, as a congregation of people who love God and love people, are invited to keep seats open at our tables for anyone who may step into our lives. We are invited to welcome the stranger to a place of hope and peace. We are invited to listen and grow in relationship because God's kingdom and kinship knows no bounds. May our tables always be open so that we may say, "Be our guest." Amen.