

Sermon Title: Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild?
Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22
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Third Sunday of Lent

It was during our time of Morning Prayer this past Friday that we found ourselves reflecting on the fact that sometimes, Jesus just doesn't fit our favored images of his life or temperament. The classic example, of course, is Luke's telling of the boy Jesus in the temple. Who is this kid who first runs off in the big city during the busiest time of the year, and then gets sassy when his worried parents finally find him? On Friday it was the Jesus who was sleeping in the boat while the storm raged, and then seemed peeved that the disciples didn't take care of things by themselves. The images remind me of my first New Testament class in seminary, when the professor told us that the project for the semester was to destroy our "favorite Jesus", in order to discover the Christ of Faith.

So it is with this Jesus who rages through the temple, whip in hand, overturning tables and frothing at the merchants and moneychangers who'd set up shop there. For those who want their religion carefully circumscribed to a personal sphere of discrete behaviors, this is not an easy picture. On a personal level, Jesus is not composed and in control. He's a little scary, to be perfectly honest about it. Maybe even a little embarrassing. Have you ever had one of those moments when maybe it was your boss, or your parent, just sort of slips a cog, and as much as anything you wished you could just slip between the cracks until it was over? "calm down, Jesus! We get it! You're a little upset, but really, you're creating quite a scene!"

And beyond that, it's a pretty established religious practice he's taking on here. If you're going to have a temple religion that calls for people to offer sacrifices of cattle and sheep and doves, well, they're going to have to come from somewhere, aren't they? This is a pretty big boat to rock. Imagine Jesus raging through the dining room a couple of Sundays ago as the youth were serving us a pancake breakfast. All we're trying to do is help the kids out here, Jesus! Get a grip!

And if it were just personal, or a matter of religious convention, I suppose it would be a little easier, but you cannot escape the economic impact of what Jesus was doing. What do you suppose the headlines would say today if a religious fanatic took after the kiosks at the Fox River Mall some Saturday afternoon? Boycotting Taco Bell's tomatoes is small potatoes in comparison. In overturning those tables, Jesus was upsetting quite a few incomes as well. How do you suppose he would have proposed to replace their livelihoods? I almost imagine the disciples scurrying behind him, picking up pieces, assuring the baffled businessmen that they would make good on any damages. This is *not* the sort of Jesus, I'm guessing, that we bargained for when we gathered around the manger with images of Charles Wesley's "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" dancing in our heads. But there are times that the favorite Jesus must be destroyed, that the Christ of faith might be found.

What do you do with this rough-edged Jesus, wild-eyed and most definitely not passive, much less pacifist? I suspect that in the nipped and tucked cliff notes version of the Gospel that most of us carry around in our heads, one way to soften the edges and round off the corners is to put the act into context. It's one of the last things Jesus does in his earthly ministry, just before the

Last Supper and the Upper Room. It's Jesus' final public act, after three long years of trying to get people to put the pieces of their faith straight. It's still embarrassing, but at least it's understandable that, after trying and trying to get the people—especially the temple-type people—to put first things first that he would finally blow a gasket.

But before we jump to that happy conclusion I have to point out a significant discrepancy in the ordering of the events of Jesus' life in the particular Gospel we read from this morning. The dead giveaway is right there in the bulletin: our Gospel lesson is found in John 2:13-22. You don't even need to know the page number to realize this cannot possibly be the end of John's telling.

I'll admit that John's chapters can get pretty long, but here's a quick recap of what's happened so far. Remember that John offers no hint of Jesus' birth. No angels, no stars, no magi, but a poem: "in the beginning was the Word." The narrative, then, starts with John the Baptist, and Jesus' baptism. From there Jesus moves directly to the Sea of Galilee (no wilderness, no temptations) and he starts calling his disciples. We get to five—one of whom is Nathaniel, who isn't even mentioned as one of the twelve in the other Gospels—and then it's off to Cana for the wedding feast, and water into wine. That's it. In verse 12, Jesus takes a little family time, but then there he is, whip in hand, creating a scene. It's not the last thing, but arguably his very first truly public act of ministry.

Which leaves, I'm afraid, with an awful lot of favorite Jesuses, if not destroyed, at least mortally wounded. No, Jesus is not the Great Negotiator, bringing the sides in a conflict together in search of a common good. No, he is not the "go-to guy" on how to win friends and influence people, or the champion of free market capitalism. He's probably not the one you'd turn to for an opening prayer at the meeting of the local Chamber of Commerce. At least as far as John is concerned, he's a loose canon, whose first public act—after that thing about 150 gallons of wine (give or take) after every other drop had been drunk—is a straightforward assault on the cultic, economic, and social status quo. And with that, it just *might* begin to make sense why they crucified him!

But a word of caution is in order. If we pick up these pieces, and try to construct another Jesus out of them, we just might find ourselves in similar straits. It's been tried: the Jesus who is quick to mount the barricades, who calls for open rebellion, and the overthrow of all order; the Jesus whose political affiliation is as easy to discover as the Communist Party membership card in his back pocket. This is the Jesus who will gladly take the coats of the rich and give them to the poor, but whose followers will conveniently miss the fact that it wasn't someone *else's* coat Jesus was talking about, but your own. It's a Jesus who's hard to reconcile with words like, "I have not come to take away one iota from the law," or who ordered those who had been made clean of their leprosy to show themselves to the priests. For that matter, it's hard to reconcile *this* Jesus with the one who, from the cross, refuses the request of one thief, to call down legions of angels to save them, but grants the wish of the other, that "this day" they would be together in paradise. The object is not to tear down one false Jesus in order to construct another in its place. The objective is to find a Jesus who is *worthy* of being called the Christ.

It would be the height of presumption for me to suggest that I *know* who *that* Jesus is. I can only, like you, learn more about him each day, precisely by entertaining the images of Jesus that I'd just as soon weren't there in the bible story and mostly as I, too, find ways of loosening my grip on the Jesus I so desperately want to hold on to. But I can share with you my hunch, as to what this disturbing story *might* be about—for you, and for me.

And the first hunch would be, once the fiery images have cooled just a bit, that it matters *deeply* to Jesus that we mind the boundaries between what is sacred in this world, and what is (to use an old-fashioned religious word) “profane.” It matters, to my mind, that it was the *temple* that Jesus felt compelled to defend from the onslaught of peddlers and bankers, because, as he said, they were making his father's house into a marketplace—a place undistinguishable from any other place in their lives.

That's challenging, in a world that wants to think of all places as “holy”, and where the common plea is that “I feel closer to God when I'm sitting out on the porch by the lake than anywhere else.” It's challenging in a world in which the “successful” churches urge that worship space has to be shorn of religious symbols, and look and feel as much as possible like a movie theater, and not too “churchy.” It's challenging in a world in which we're tempted to think about the church as one more “commodity” to be packaged and marketed to a particular audience. Jesus, so it seems to me, understood that a proper appreciation of the world we live in demands that we claim certain places as *holy*, and that we *keep* them that way.

So here's an interesting question to ponder: where *are* the holy places in your life, the holy times, or spaces? And what are you doing to protect them from the encroachment of everything else this world thinks is of ultimate value? I wonder if that's not one of the reasons that the church through the ages has encouraged the faithful to a Lenten fast—as a way of marking out a portion of our days—Frederick Buechner is the one who helped me to notice that it is, in essence, a tithe of the year—in order to keep them holy.

Which leads to my second hunch as to the reason this distinction between what is “holy” and what is “profane”, “sacred” and “secular” is so important, is because if we cannot name that which is holy, then we will not know what it is that needs to be healed. It's only the shortest of steps from “I can feel God's presence everywhere” to “everything is God,” but that, at the end of the day, is the stuff that idolatry is made of. It's the lesson that the great theologian Karl Barth learned as he watched his learned professors line up in obedience to the demands of the National Socialist Party in Germany in the 1930's. Their hunger to find God in all places had left them incapable of seeing the monstrous evil that was building right in front of them. Barth understood that the eyes of faith must *always* meet this world in a critical fashion—sniffing out the idolatries, and abominations that can take root, even on the steps of the temple, in the name of proper piety.

That's an important thing to remember in a time in which I fear some have elided our pride at being Americans with our calling to live as Christians—who confuse faith in democracy, or military might, or western culture with the faith of Christ. It's not the *last* step of faithfulness to carry that critical judgment into the world around us. If John's Jesus is to teach us, it is the *first* step: not to meekly conform to our world, or to benignly nod at its incursion into our

understandings of what it means to be *Holy*, but to stand ready to claim that which is sacred. Because it is *only* then that we can clearly see how fully, and how deeply, each of us needs to be healed.

Do I dare suggest that this is precisely what our Muslim sisters and brothers have in their sights when they talk about “Jihad”? It is, at heart, the vigorous defense of holiness, which begins in the heart of the individual believer, but inevitably spreads out into the world around them. Not that Jesus would have had any time for those who have hijacked not only airplanes, but the core of the faith of Islam—these teachings, it seems, are as subject to corruption in just the same manner that good Christian teachings can be twisted and distorted. But that Jesus who stands on the temple steps with whip in hand, driving the money changers out, and fighting for the holiness of the temple, looks an awful lot like a Jihadist, not in strapping explosives to himself in order to take as much innocent life as possible, but in claiming that which is holy, and seeking to protect it from all the forces in this world that seek its corruption.

It’s a hard thought, but this is a hard Jesus, who understood that the work of salvation would not be accomplished by generations stacking one brick on top of another, but by willingly pouring out your life for the cause of faith—“Destroy this temple, and in three days it shall rise again!” It’s a Jesus who’s wisdom sounds a little foolish, but there he is, challenging us to name, and to claim that which is truly God in the world around us, and to protect it—to pour out our life on its behalf—it’s not my favorite Jesus, but it is a Christ who challenges, and so grows, my faith.

Let us pray.