

Inversion
John 2: 13-22
March 4, 2018
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Clemson, SC

Introduction to the text.

The Gospel of John differs in many ways from the other three gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke which are called the “Synoptic” gospels meaning they see with the same or similar eye. John’s gospel is the fourth and written later, presents a different view of the life of Jesus—generally thought of as emphasizing his divinity. Our story for today is when Jesus Cleanses the Temple and it is recorded in all four gospels. The Synoptics all place it near the end of Jesus’ ministry which scholars believe is more historically accurate, but John places it near the very beginning of his gospel. This very public expression by Jesus follows the intimate setting of the wedding at Cana when Jesus changed the water into wine and precedes the private encounter of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night to learn about being born again.

While it is not commanded in Scripture, some traditions among Christians regularly stand for the reading of the Gospel. In light of our text today, I invite you to stand for the reading of the Gospel and I hope it will open all of us to hear the word afresh. Thank you for rising to the occasion.

Prayer for Illumination

Since we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth, make us hunger for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

Read John 2: 13-22.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

To show respect for the role of rabbis who are seated as they teach, I will sit for the proclamation and I hope to offer us a more intimate look at what is going on in our Scripture. These movements are intentional today because Jesus had upset the norm in the temple and my hope is that we might attend to the text this day by inversion.

Perhaps you have had one of those times where everything you planned for your day was nowhere near what your day ended up being. Everything was turned upside down. Nothing was in its usual place and what ordinarily would occur did not. I had several days like that this week and what I have learned about the inversion is to not become anxious, but turn over my will to Christ.

The students and teachers of Marjory Stoneman Douglas had a day like that too. And now the survivors are still having their lives upended, some with death threats as they seek to have their lives back to normal, but only by seeking a new normal. While these are what I would call inversions, they remind me that inversions cause us to give up something of ourselves and are often threatening, not exactly like the inversion that Jesus caused in the temple that day but examples of sacrifice and risk.

Jesus began his ministry at the Wedding at Cana, and now he's moved to the public arena and specifically the temple. Instead of finding the mood of the temple as a house of prayer, he finds livestock and birds and all manner of money changing going on at tables. Can you imagine cattle in here? This business of doing sacrifice with the right animal was one that drew more profit for the leaders of the temple and less attention to matters of worship. And Jesus takes the time to make a whip of cords. Only in John's gospel do we see Jesus this intense and angry that he whips in addition to flips, pours and quotes a psalm of lament like the prophets of old do.

Some people might want to say Jesus is violent here, and that could be surmised, but the Greek leads us to believe that the whip he made would have been a few cords wrapped together after he was in the temple. He used the whip to clear the animals from the temple and he dealt with the humans by overturning the tables and pouring out their profits. He basically upset the temple routine so badly that they could not go about their ritual sacrifice as worship. Jesus, by whipping them out of the temple, preserves the lives of the animals, and points to the profiteering of the temple leaders. "The Jews" that are often pitted against Jesus in the fourth gospel are these corrupt leaders and not the Jewish people as a whole. It is important to make this distinction so we are not tempted to be anti-Semitic in our understanding of what's happening here.

Jesus is the prophet speaking truth to people in positions of power in the temple system. He is reclaiming his Father's house from those who have made it theirs instead. The disciples are observing this exchange between Jesus and the temple leaders and when the disciples remember the psalm of lament, they change it from past to future tense. "Zeal for your house has consumed me. Zeal for your house will consume me." The zeal for your house that will consume" Jesus is this very corruption, the temple leaders lining their pockets with excess money taken in the name of sacrificing to God. These are the voices that, consumed by their greed and power, will zealously call for Jesus to be crucified.

The sacrifice that will be made is not animals, but Jesus. He not only speaks truth to power, but he takes action. Just as the best wine was served last at Cana so too will this Jesus cause the first to be last and the last to be first. The tables that he overturns point to how this prophet who is the Messiah will respond to the Jewish leaders' request for a sign. They expect a legal

warrant, credentials that will make his action of cleansing their temple appropriate within their system. Instead Jesus gives them the ultimate challenge—“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” But these words were only for those who had ears to hear. The temple authorities cannot hear this fresh word, but his disciples understood after the resurrection that Jesus was referring to his own body, the revelatory act that voided all other credentials Jesus ever needed. He prophesied that the temple will be raised again in three days and the zeal of the Lord of Hosts did this.ⁱ

We too confuse the sanctuary building and the body of Christ. We think it is *our zeal* for God’s house that will protect it, but the *zeal for the marketplace* that has been made actually consumes God’s house.

Let me say that another way in our present day context.

Keep in mind that the temple is the locus of God’s body on earth. Some people say they come to church to meet Jesus, but if the church is the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is the people of God, then God is not limited to meeting people only in this building.

So we think that forming safety patrols in our churches will protect it, but the zeal for selling more guns and leaving gun laws as they are consumes the lives of people created in the image of God. Partisan politics has consumed God’s house and we are afraid to muster a group to advocate change that will preserve lives.

The temple Jesus referred to was his own body. The institution of the church has been finely tuned in our contemporary world. We are living in a time when institutional breakdowns are happening every day.ⁱⁱ And all institutions can be challenged by God, not just religious ones. All can have corrupt leadership that consumes with zeal those who are of greatest value, yet made to appear as the least.ⁱⁱⁱ

Think again of those students in Parkland, FL who are giving us a sign—a sign of life by challenging and asking questions that adults should have answered a long time ago in order to preserve life and end the sacrifices of our nation’s children. Listen to our children praying, singing, speaking truth to power, and watch as they overturn the tables of institutions well-oiled and satiated by millions of dollars.

Friend and scholar Bobby Williamson says these words about the text today: “The keepers of the status quo cannot tolerate the Christ, who upends all settled realities, flipping the world on its head. Institutional religion cannot countenance a God who even now is making all things new.” “The only institution that matters—the only temple—is the body of Christ, crucified and resurrected.”^{iv}

You and I will continue to have days where our plans are thwarted, where inversions occur. When I did this week, I found myself exactly where God wanted me to be, serving among the body of Christ, tending the sick and making myself low in order to raise up another to preserve life.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ **Isaiah 9:7** ⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

ⁱⁱ U.S. businesses are buying foreign companies in countries with lower tax rates so they can switch their legal home and cut their tax bills. The process, known as *inversion*, is the hottest trend in mergers and acquisitions, driving some of the biggest takeovers this year.
—Tom Fairless and Shayndi Raice

^{iv} Quote from Bobby Williamson in “Justice for Lent : Overturning Establishment Religion (John 2:13-22).
<https://robertwilliamsonjr.com/overturning-established-religion-john-213-22/> accessed 02.27.2018.