Disturbing the Peace
Ben Johnston-Krase
January 19, 2014

John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” 18 The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” 19 Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” 20 The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

This past week, I was rummaging around in the house, and I found a drawer that I’d never noticed before. I opened it, and found that it contained five eggs and an envelope with $1,000 in it. So I went to Karla and said, “Honey, do you know anything about this drawer?” She told me that every time I give a bad sermon she puts an egg in the drawer. I said to her, “Wow, after all these years in ministry, only five eggs! Not bad at all! What about the $1,000?” She said, “Every time I get a dozen eggs, I sell them.”

Jesus had some great sermons—the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”—the Sermon on the Plain: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged”—his Sermon by the sea where he spoke about the Kingdom of God—lots of great sermons. You couldn’t blame people if they thought that Jesus was saving a really, really good sermon for his first appearance at the temple in Jerusalem, right? After all, the temple was the very center of religious life for the Jewish people. Surely Jesus would save his best sermon for the temple, wouldn’t he?

15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

Doesn’t really sound like a sermon at all, does it? If Jesus was hoping to preach that day, he pretty much ruined his chances when he went ballistic and scattered the congregation. So maybe we could ask, “What made Jesus so angry—angry enough to wreck the furniture and drive everyone away?” Most of us, in our minds, like to keep an image of Jesus the peacemaker, the gentle teacher who loved and forgave and shared Good News and welcomed the children…

So what was going on in the temple in Jerusalem to make Jesus become so unglued and behave so erratically? Let’s shoot back a couple thousand years in history and let’s talk about the temple in Jerusalem. Let’s say you and your spouse traveled to Jerusalem during the Passover, and with you, you brought an appropriate sacrifice to God, as was prescribed in the Hebrew
Scriptures. So maybe you brought a ram and two turtledoves to offer in the Temple. Well, when you arrived at the Temple, guess what happened? A priest met you at the door and it was his job to “inspect” your sacrifice to make sure that it was of a high enough quality to be acceptable.

In many, many cases, the animals were rejected. Maybe the priest would claim that they were too old, or that they weren’t the right size, or that they had spots or blemishes. “But don’t worry,” the priest would say, “we just happen to have our own hand-picked selection of sacrificial animals right over here.” Never mind the fact that the markup on rams and turtledoves for sale in the Temple was significant—you had two choices: leave, having done nothing according to the Scriptures, or pay through the nose and upgrade your offerings.

So you get out your money to buy your replacement ram and turtledoves. But guess whose face is on your coins? Caesar’s. And they don’t accept Roman coinage there at the Temple. “But don’t worry,” the priests says. “We’re a one-stop shop! You can exchange those coins for our Temple currency right over here at the money changing tables!” And, of course, there’s an exchange rate that goes with that.

As church fundraisers go, this was a pretty lucrative scheme:

- Make people bring animals to sacrifice at the temple.
- Tell them their animals aren’t good enough.
- Charge them for new ones.
- Refuse to accept their Roman money when they try to buy the animals you say they must have.
- Take their money anyway and give them temple coins at an unfair rate.
- Then take their temple coins when they buy the animals you are forcing them to buy.

Jesus shows up and he can barely stand the thought of the Temple being used in this way. He loses it! He becomes unhinged, unmanageable! He grabs a cord and makes himself a big ol’ whip and starts cracking that thing, driving the animals out. He even brazenly approaches the moneychangers’ tables, *whip probably still in hand*, and starts dumping out their coins, all over the tables, rolling all over the floor. And then he does them one better—he just upends the tables themselves. You can imagine the ear-splitting “THUNK” of the long wooden tables as they hit the stone floor.

Occasionally in our Wednesday noon Bible study we wonder what it would be like if Jesus were alive and walked our streets today—if Jesus had chosen our time and place to be in ministry in the world. Where would he go and what would he say? We catch ourselves from time to time assuming that Jesus would fit right in—that he’d be a likeable, approachable teacher who commanded the world’s attention and easily earned our love, respect, and admiration.

The truth is, however, that things being the way they are and humans being human, *we have labels* for people like Jesus: agitator, radical, malcontent, troublemaker, propagandist… In this day and age, people like Jesus make headlines *not* for being kind or thoughtful or *even for embodying the essence of God’s love and grace*. No, people like Jesus make headlines for *disturbing the peace*. 
Author and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor recalls attending a retreat once where the leader asked everyone present to think of someone who represented Jesus Christ in their lives. When it came time to share their answers, one woman stood up and said, “I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, ‘Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?’” [1]

We forget this about Jesus—that he didn’t care much about being liked, that he often preached at his own expense, that almost everything he did got him into hot water—the things he said, the company he kept, the lepers he touched, the prostitutes he welcomed, the tax collectors he ate with, the “work” he did on the Sabbath, the Samaritans he honored, and certainly the tables he crashed to the floor in the temple of all places… Just about everywhere he went, Jesus was a disturber of the peace.

In October of 1967 in the state of California, 70-some women were arrested for their participation in a rally protesting the Vietnam War, and in particular the draft. During their incarceration, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a vigil outside the prison walls, and it was during this vigil that he said that “There can be no justice without peace, and there can be no peace without justice.” For the Rev. Dr. King, peace without justice was a peace that needed to be disturbed.

When I was right out of seminary, I interviewed a handful of churches in and around Chicago and Milwaukee. With each search committee, I informed them that at the time I was part of That All May Freely Serve, an organization working for the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as elders, deacons, and pastors in the Presbyterian Church. I was curious about their reactions, and more often than not, the response I got was, “Oh, well, we don’t have that issue here.” And so I would ask, “Really? What does that mean?” “Well, we just don’t… we never… we don’t talk about that here.” Clearly the anxiety level in the room went up as they imagined me, their pastor, disrupting their long-enjoyed peace by even mentioning the word “gay” from their pulpit. But that kind of peace isn’t peace at all. It’s avoidance. And it demands disturbance.

I knew a family once. The kids walked home every day from school—not because they wanted to, and not because school was close to home and they could, but because Mom drank a bottle of wine every afternoon and was in no condition to drive. So they walked home. And no one, including Dad, said a thing. Best not to disturb the peace. But that wasn’t peace. That was fear and shame-induced silence. And it begged for disturbance.

In that relationship you have with that other person who disappoints you again and again, and so gradually over time you ratchet down your expectations to the point of almost not having any so as to keep the peace for the sake of the relationship… That’s not peace. That’s self-imposed indifference. That peace demands disturbance.

In our city and in our country, where the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer, where the average age of homelessness is 9, where we criminalize many of the symptoms of poverty without treating the disease of poverty, where 51 years after Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech racism still fuels separation between black and white, and yet some of us still
enjoy the peace afforded to us by our relative privilege. That’s not peace. It’s denial. And it must be disturbed.

Sometimes the peace we think we have is a peace that demands disturbance. And the good news—sometimes the hard news—but the good news for you and me is that Jesus was a disturber of the peace. Jesus marched into the temple, a peaceful place that was not unlike many corners of the world, near and far, where peace depended heavily on the powerful setting the rules and the powerless asking no questions. Jesus marched into that temple with a whip in one hand and said, “We’re starting over here!”

This is the same Jesus who worked through the Civil Rights Movement, barging into temples of white power and turning over tables of privilege.

This is the same Jesus today, working in our churches, barging into temples of our own homophobia and turning over tables of inequality for gay couples.

This is the same Jesus today, who longs to work in your relationships, where you are either the abuser or the abused. Maybe you’re the one demanding silence or you’re the one who’s too afraid to speak up. Jesus longs to come into the temple of that relationship where you are struggling and disturb the peace by turning over the tables of the way things are so that destructive patterns can end or be changed.

This is the same Jesus today, entering our churches, where we have lulled ourselves into a life-long religious trance, in which we somehow think we can be faithful to God without being faithful to the Way of Jesus Christ, and its Spirited lack of compromise when it comes to God’s compassion for the poor and outcast in society. Perhaps Methodist Bishop Will Willimon says it best. “In my experience,” says Willimon, “churches always hope that it is possible to be faithful to the mandates of Jesus Christ without the pain of disruption and dislocation.” [2]

But the thing is that Jesus Christ is a Disturber of the Peace. Perhaps this Jesus longs to enter the confines of the temple of your own heart and life, where you feel like you’ve got things fairly well under control. What would Jesus drive out of your life? What tables would he overturn in your soul? Is there a “peace” in you that demands disturbance?

Let us pray. Holy Christ, enter our lives. Drive out our attachments, and with them, storms of anxiety and mistrust. Upend the tables of our privilege and pride. Let the things that keep us from you go crashing to the floor. Reclaim your place in our lives as we reclaim ourselves in God’s image. For our sake and for each other’s, in Christ’s name. Amen.
