

A Day in the Life Sermon Series  
Jesus Loses It  
Mark 11:15-19  
February 27, 2022

We disciples tend to be a rational, logical sort, so sometimes we hear about religious phenomena that we have trouble believing, like a statue of Mary that starts crying real tears or the image of Jesus showing up on a grilled cheese sandwich. Well, all you doubters, I have just the thing for you! A company called Burnt Impressions now makes a toaster that will emblazon on your plain old bread an image of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You no longer have to wonder if that's crust or Christ! The image is crystal clear and ready for jelly and butter. How much would you pay for this miracle manna maker? \$50? \$75 \$100? Well, you can get your Jesus Toaster for the low, low price of \$34.95. This angelic appliance will have you saying, "I can't believe it's not Jesus!" Also available in Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

We can laugh all we want, but the fact that this item even exists is proof that Christianity is big business. And if you are still skeptical, I checked the Burnt Impressions website and they are sold out of Jesus Toasters. But, thankfully, you can still find the red T-shirt designed like a Heinz bottle which says, "Catching up with Jesus." You can find a wide variety of Christian bestsellers in books, music, DVDs, toys, games, knick-knacks – not to mention a little manuscript we call the Bible. And while we'd like to believe that everyone who sells Christian merchandise is on the up-and-up and donates 10% of their earnings to the church, every once in awhile you'll find a swindler who's trying to make money off good Christians by selling them something like a Jesus toaster.

Despite the explosion of capitalism, this is not a new phenomenon. People have been exploiting religion in order to make money for centuries, including in our story today. And Jesus is not very happy about it. As we conclude our "Day in the Life" sermon series, we're looking at that one time in the Bible when Jesus went bonkers. Today's story is a popular point of reference when people ask about Jesus' humanity. Was Jesus really human? Did he really feel human emotion? Well, there's that temple story! You know, the one where he got so mad he started tossing furniture like Bobby Knight? It's good that we know about this story, but it's also important that we understand WHY Jesus reacted this way. Otherwise, we're led to believe Jesus is a short-tempered savior who uses physical intimidation to get his way. If that's NOT who Jesus is, then what's going on here?

This is one of those stories that is imbedded in context, so to fully understand it we have to do some archaeology to get to what's going on. This story takes place in Mark's gospel right after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when Jesus arrives in the city for his last week. One of the first things Jesus wants to do is spend some time in the temple, the most sacred site in the land, the beacon of light for Jews around the world. The temple was thought to be the closest point of connection between heaven and earth. It was holy ground.

The temple itself was constructed in layers. The innermost layer was the Holy of Holies, the place where God was thought to dwell and that was only entered once a year by a priest. Moving out from that in concentric layers was the Court of the Priests, the Court of the Israelites, and the Outer Court. The last layer which surrounded all of this was the Court of the Gentiles, through which everyone would pass before they could enter into the Temple proper to offer a sacrifice or prayer. It's like the ring of concession stands you encounter before you enter the

actual playing field at a stadium, where you can buy a hot dog and a soda for the price of a small car.

That price-gouging is exactly what was happening in the Court of the Gentiles. People were coming from all over the world to offer sacrifice at the temple, which would include paying a temple tax. While people were bringing their local currency, the temple only accepted shekels, so a money changer would convert your drachmas to shekels – for an upcharge. Then, you would need to purchase your animals for sacrifice, because the temple only accepted certain kinds of doves or rams. So, you could buy a \$3 dove – for \$10. It was a captive audience and the merchants in the temple were getting rich off of other people’s spirituality.

So this is the situation into which Jesus walks. Poor, sick, and oppressed people who’ve been told they are poor, sick and oppressed because they’ve sinned against God, are coming to the temple to offer sacrifices in order to receive forgiveness for whatever they’ve done that’s made them poor, sick and oppressed. But in order to afford this sacrifice, they are being forced to pay exorbitant prices that will ensure they stay poor, sick, and oppressed, so that next year this vicious cycle can play itself out all over again. Is it any wonder Jesus gets upset?

A mere lesson or parable isn’t going to cut it in this situation. Jesus needs to do something to get the attention of the chief priests and scribes, the ones who are sanctioning this highway robbery to begin with. So, in order to make a statement, Jesus loses his temper. He starts throwing chairs and turning over tables. In John’s version of this story Jesus actually fashions a whip and goes all Indiana Jones on the place. Can you see him? His face is red, the veins bulge in his neck, his voice rages. This hardly sounds like a teaching moment, unless your class is being taught by a professional wrestler.

And yet, Mark says, “He was teaching, saying, ‘Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’” Is it ethical to teach using fear and intimidation as tactics? I know some basketball coaches who would have no trouble with that. But if a teacher did this today in a school, not only would they not win any Teacher of the Year awards, they would probably be arrested. This is Jesus at his most human, truly losing his temper and letting his anger get the best of him. Are we OK with Jesus acting like this?

I trust that he only responds this way because he knew this level of reaction was needed. A light scolding or hand-slap wouldn’t do. He had to let the temple leaders know what they were doing was wrong, even if it meant sealing his own fate. There’s no way they could let him live after this public display of rebellion against the power structures, but he had to make a statement. This is Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenburg. This is Gandhi standing up to British oppression. This is Dr. King delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech. This is someone being willing to stride right into the turf of their enemy and expose them for what they are.

I believe these tactics actually have a place in religion, but we have to be very careful in how we use them. A scalpel can be an instrument of healing in the hands of a doctor or an instrument of death in the hands of a criminal. It’s not the tool itself that is evil; it’s how it is used. Contrary to all the paintings with Jesus holding a little lamb or Jesus with fabulous hair looking reverently up to Heaven, Jesus can be a bit scary at times, so I think it’s OK to be afraid of him, in the sense of a reverential, awe-inspired fear. God is so much bigger than anything we can ever imagine, and if we lose sight of that and don’t keep a respectful distance, we may begin to think that we’re a lot closer to being like God ourselves than we really are.

What Jesus is doing here is shining a blinding light on the dark places in the temple where greed and corruption have taken root. The temple didn’t start out this way, but over time and

through human influence, it became corrupt, it started rotting from the inside out, and the only way to restore it is through cleansing. Jesus is not causing trouble. He's simply bringing to light the trouble that was already happening, speaking up for the poor and the sick and the oppressed who couldn't speak up for themselves.

That's what makes Jesus angry. Poor people were getting cheated. Sick people were being denied access to God. God's house, which was supposed to be a house of prayer for ALL nations, had been sectioned off and compartmentalized so that some had access and others were excluded based on who they were. You're Jewish? Come on in! You're a woman? Well, you can come to this point. You're a Gentile? Sorry, we're closed. These conditions made Jesus so angry that his rage boiled over into this overt demonstration of rebellion against the way things are. For Jesus, walls needed to crumble and power structures needed to be exposed in order for healing to begin. Sometimes you gotta turn over some tables.

So how would we react in this situation? If we knew that poor people were getting cheated, would we be angry? If we knew sick people were being treated as second-class citizens, would we speak up? If we knew some people were being excluded simply because of who they were, would we be willing to turn over a few tables and speak up for those who have been denied a voice? Our society is broken in many ways, and while it's easy to blame those in power or those striving for power, I think we have to start in our own temples.

Henri Nouwen said, "Changing human society and changing human hearts are not separate tasks, but are as interconnected as the two beams of a cross." As we prepare to move into Lent, our self-examination can include acknowledging the places in our lives where we've taken shortcuts, where we've become passive to the corruption around us. What tables would Jesus need to turn over in our lives to get our attention? Is there a pressure point in your life where Jesus the permissive friend needs to become Jesus the bouncer or Jesus the fiery prophet? What injustice have you been OK with for too long? Sometimes you gotta turn over some tables.

I don't like this Jesus. But I NEED this Jesus. I need to consistently put myself in relationship with someone who will speak the truth to me and so that I can then stand up and speak the truth to others for the purpose of making this world more like the kingdom of God. Corruption, oppression, exclusion...these things are the kind of things that made Jesus angry. What in this world makes us angry enough to be Christ-like? When Jesus got angry, walls crumbled. He stood up and said, "You know, this isn't right. This isn't the way God wants it to be." That describes so much of our world right now. So, who's going to stand up?