

JESUS, THE VIOLENT
A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Remember those gospel passages so often quoted to create the image of a meek and mild Jesus? “Do not resist an evil doer...If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”ⁱ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”ⁱⁱ “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”ⁱⁱⁱ Then, this morning we get a gospel passage^{iv} where Jesus fashions a whip and violently drives people out of the temple in Jerusalem, along with the sheep and cattle they’re selling for ritual sacrifices. He also violently overturns the tables of money changers and pours out all of their coins. This incident is repeated in some form or another in all four of the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There’s a striking painting by El Greco reproduced in the most recent issue of *Newsweek* which has Jesus flailing away with his whip at cowering money changers.^v There are other passages in the New Testament where Jesus insists that “The one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one,”^{vi} and where he exclaims “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.”^{vii} So, this morning we have Jesus, the Violent, to deal with.

Let’s get the setting of this morning’s gospel lesson right first. In Israel at the time there was one and only temple, and it was located in the ancient capital of Jerusalem. The action we’re considering took place around 30 A.D., but John, writing some fifty years later, knew that after a thousand years of history, the temple had been utterly destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.^{viii} Yet, at the time the Jewish Jesus is living, the temple’s being reconstructed and its priests are at the height of their power as official leaders of Judaism. Jesus is a country bumpkin from the Galilee region, recently arrived in the big city. In three of the four gospel accounts^{ix} going to the temple is the first thing he does after his triumphal arrival in Jerusalem less than a week before he’s killed. It appears to be precisely because of this brash, violent act in the temple that he’s targeted for execution, for this was a deep offense to the religious authorities in Jerusalem.^x As the gospel of Mark puts it, “When the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him.”^{xi} Perhaps Jesus should have heeded his own words about violence breeding violence: “All who take the sword will perish by the sword.”^{xii}

Now, why were all these sheep, cattle and doves being sold inside the temple in the first place, and what were the money changers doing there? Pilgrims were coming from all over the region for the Passover holiday, and animal sacrifice was central to religious practice in the temple. Rather than the faithful undergoing the expense of bringing cows, sheep and birds with them from afar, animals which could become burnt offerings were on sale right at the temple when they arrived. However, the normal Roman currency couldn’t be used for purchase, because of the idolatry of having a graven image of the supposedly divine Caesar on it. Therefore, as a service to the pilgrims, money-changers exchanged the Roman coins for shekels, which could then be used as tender for the sacrificial animals.^{xiii}

According to the account in John, Jesus doesn't seem concerned with the possible dishonesty of the traffickers in the temple – nothing about a den of thieves as in the other gospels.^{xiv} Instead, he's concerned with the system of sacrifice itself and the whole temple cult.^{xv} When he says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,"^{xvi} he's referring to himself as the good news which will replace the temple cult.^{xvii}

In a new book,^{xviii} Catholic historian and social critic Garry Wills explains that "The most striking, resented, and dangerous of Jesus's activities was his opposition to religion as that was understood in his time. This is what led to his death. Religion killed him."^{xix} It begins with Jesus' rejection of animal sacrifice. As he says a couple of times, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"^{xx} He's referring to words of the prophet Hosea, speaking for God, in the Hebrew scriptures:^{xxi} "Hear this, O priests! ... I desire mercy and steadfast love, not sacrifice; [I desire] the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."^{xxii} At another point Jesus commends a religious official who says "To love God with one's entire heart, mind and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself – that is much more important than any kind of burnt offering or sacrifice."^{xxiii}

Next, Jesus moves on to challenge the priesthood itself. As he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate how to love one's neighbor as oneself, it's a priest on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho who first passes by the robbed, stripped and beaten man, leaving him unassisted on the side of the road.^{xxiv} It's priests who are constantly portrayed as Jesus' mortal enemies.^{xxv} There's never a single priest cited as being among his followers.^{xxvi}

Finally, Jesus questions the importance of the temple itself to the spiritual life. "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up."^{xxvii} The temple cult is to be replaced by Jesus' inner religion, centered in himself as the embodiment of God's love. Garry Wills wonders what Jesus today would think of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, or Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California: "Jesus did not come to replace the Temple with other building, whether huts or rich cathedrals," as Wills puts it. "but to instill a religion of the heart."^{xxviii} Of course, we might wonder what Jesus would think of the Stanford Memorial Church and its vested clergy.

Indeed, what might the image of Jesus in the temple with a whip in the temple tell us about institutional religion in our time – in particular about Christian churches, clergy, and practice? First, there's the specter of a 900-foot-tall Jesus telling Oral Roberts in 1980 to build his City of Faith with three skyscrapers in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and then in 1987, during a television fund-raising drive, Roberts announcing that God had warned that he'd "call him home" unless Roberts raised enough money by March.^{xxix} Is that really what Jesus is doing with his whip in this era? A scholar has written of the twentieth century figure, Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement in America and one who was personally committed to voluntary poverty: "I don't think the [church] hierarchy quite knew what to do with her. She was like having a time bomb in your diocese because she might tell all. She could see the scandal, see all the rich properties owned by the church. So she's one of those people who's much easier to applaud now that she's dead."^{xxx}

As for clergy, Jesus condemned religious leaders of his day who "on the outside look righteous to others...but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."^{xxxi} We

might remember, for example, Pat Robertson's protégé Jim Bakker who started his own enormously successful televangelism empire and Heritage USA theme park with his wife Tammy Faye. His personal compensation in the mid-1980's reached well over a million dollars a year, and the Bakkers owned a house in Palm Springs, four condominiums in other parts of California and a Rolls Royce. In late 1980's, though, Bakker was found to be having an affair with his former secretary and then imprisoned after a federal conviction on fraud charges for financial irregularities in his PTL, or Praise the Lord, organization.^{xxxii} Of course, sex scandals have affected many other Protestant clergy and Roman Catholic priests, which along with financial improprieties, have led clergy to plummet in professional trustworthiness polls by the Gallup organization to the lowest point ever by 2003, with only 52% of Americans giving my profession high marks.^{xxxiii}

Finally, there's religious practice in our day. We're not doing a lot of animal sacrifice in churches any more, but Jesus stressed love of God and love of neighbor as the central religious duties. He constantly crossed lines of ritual purity to be with those considered unclean – lepers, the insane, prostitutes, adulterers, and collaborators with Rome.^{xxxiv} Garry Wills asks who the outcasts, who the cursed, of our day are – with whom Jesus would be quick to align himself in love. “Gays and lesbians” is Wills' answer. He writes about Christians groups showing up at funerals of gay men who died of AIDS with placards saying “God hates fags.” About Christian burials being denied to openly gay men. “Is there any doubt where Jesus would have stood in these episodes...He was with the gay man, not with his haters. This is made all the clearer by the fact that gays are called unclean for the same reason as were other outcasts of Jesus' time – because they violate the Holiness Code of the Book of Leviticus.”^{xxxv}

There's a tongue-in-cheek letter circulating on the Internet, written to a Christian who's assumed to take everything in the Holiness Code as seriously as the two lines in Leviticus [18:22 and 20:13] which say that it's an abomination for a man to lie with a male as with a woman:

“Leviticus 25:44 states that I may possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans but not Canadians. Can you clarify? ... “I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states that he should be put to death. Am I morally obliged to kill him myself, or should I ask the police to do it?” ... “I know from Leviticus 11:8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?” And the letter goes on in this vein to ask seven more questions.^{xxxvi} How much patience do you think Jesus in the temple with his whip would have with these kinds of questions?

So, what do we make of Jesus the violent? What of the Jesus who thunders “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ... For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth... You testify against yourselves that you are descendents of those who murdered the prophets... You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?” I agree with Wills that there's no doubt that Jesus was opposed to war and violence.^{xxxvii} “More than any other teacher of nonviolence – more than Thoreau, than Gandhi, than Dr. King”^{xxxviii} love was the test for him. “In the gospel of Jesus, love is everything.”^{xxxix} So this action in the temple was a “breathtaking explosion of a man not easily aroused.”^{xl} This was highly unusual behavior for Jesus.

What exactly stimulates this level of righteous indignation? Institutional religion gone wrong, that's what. Clergy pursuing religious practices that have gone far astray from what's really important. A huge, glorious temple dedicated to an abomination,^{xli} rather than to love of God and neighbor.

Jesus roars in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah: "Hear the word of the Lord! ... What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ... I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams... Who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile...an abomination to me...Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Jesus cries out in the tradition of the prophet Micah: "With what shall I come before the Lord?...Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ... He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."^{xlii}

So let's hope the nonviolent Jesus didn't badly hurt anyone as he drove them and their animals out of the temple with his whip and overturned their tables. He paid for his temple anger with his own life. But he'd come to the very center of his religious tradition and found it totally misdirected. "Turn back, turn back" he'd cried, and put a little muscle behind it. Might we listen and respond in our own time to the visionary dream that earth might be fair and all its people one.^{xliii}

NOTES

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- ⁱ Matthew 5:39; cf. Luke 6:29.
- ⁱⁱ Matthew 5:9.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 5:44; Luke 6: 27, 35.
- ^{iv} John 2: 13-22.
- ^v *Newsweek* (March 20, 2006), p. 72.
- ^{vi} Luke 22: 36, 38.
- ^{vii} Matthew 10: 34.
- ^{viii} *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: 1993), p. 2012.
- ^{ix} Matthew, Mark and Luke.
- ^x John Barton and John Muddiman (eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 965.
- ^{xi} Mark 11:18; cf. Luke 19:47.
- ^{xii} Matthew 26:52.
- ^{xiii} *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 429.
- ^{xiv} Cf. Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46.
- ^{xv} *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 543.
- ^{xvi} John 2:19.
- ^{xvii} *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 544-545; *Jerome Commentary*, p. 429.
- ^{xviii} Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant* (New York: Viking, 2006).
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ^{xx} Matthew 9:13 and 12:7.
- ^{xxi} *HarperCollins Study Bible*, pp. 1873, 1879.
- ^{xxii} Hosea 5:1, 6:6.
- ^{xxiii} Mark 12:33.
- ^{xxiv} Luke 10:31.
- ^{xxv} For example, Matthew 21:15 and 26:59; Mark 11:18 and 14:1; Luke 19:47 and 22:2; John 7:32.
- ^{xxvi} Wills, *What Jesus Meant*, pp. 67-71.
- ^{xxvii} John 2:19.
- ^{xxviii} Wills, *What Jesus Meant*, pp. 75-76.
- ^{xxix} "Oral Roberts," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_Roberts
- ^{xxx} Michael True, professor emeritus of Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts, as quoted in Rosalie G. Riegler, *Dorothy Day: Portraits By Those Who Knew Her* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 94.
- ^{xxxi} Matthew 23: 28, 25.
- ^{xxxii} "Jim Bakker," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Bakker
- ^{xxxiii} "Religion News Service, "Clergy Ratings at Lowest Point Ever," *Christianity Today* (February, 2003), p. 21.
- ^{xxxiv} Wills, *What Jesus Meant*, p. xviii.
- ^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ^{xxxvi} As cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
- ^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*, p. 52.

^{xxxix} *Ibid.*, p. 56.

^{xl} *Ibid.*, p. 24.

^{xli} See Isaiah 1: 10-17.

^{xlii} Micah 6: 6-8.

^{xliii} Clifford Bax, "Turn Back," Hymn #120 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).