

Upsetting the Apple Cart

John 2:13-22

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Let's start with a pop quiz. You don't have to answer out loud, or even raise your hand, but think about your answer to yourself. Here is the question: Do you trust Jesus? Do you trust him to work for good in your life and in the life of this church? Do you trust him?

This question seems so simple, doesn't it? It should be easy to answer "yes." But you may feel a little reservation in saying that you place your trust in Jesus because you are not sure what I am going to say next. I ask us this question, because Jesus Christ is the head of this church, and trust in him is where we must begin and end when we prayerfully make decisions about the future of this church, as we will later this year.

Now, most of you know, though perhaps some of you do not, that I will retire next year, probably around Memorial Day. This information was shared with the congregation when I was called here. I will be 75 years old in March of 2025, and my beloved Dave will turn 79 in May. By then, I will be ready to hand off this precious ministry to the next fortunate pastor, and begin to spend my time at home with Dave. I am really looking forward to having time to do my share of the housework. I also want to be able to head to Virginia to see our grandkids whenever it suits us. I want very much to be able to spend Christmas Eve with our grandchildren, something that is just not possible while I am in active ministry. So, next year, I will be ready to retire.

We are not there yet. I don't have one foot out the door. Until that day comes, I will enjoy every single moment of being here in ministry with you. But there is some work to be done to get us from here to there, and you need to be aware that that work is beginning.

In the January newsletter, Moderator Pam Brown wrote a letter to all of you, explaining that it is time for us to begin to consider our options for what comes next. These are mostly questions we have asked ourselves before – Can we possibly afford a fulltime pastor? Can we stay at three-quarter time? Do we need to go to half-time? What about yoking with another church? What factors affect the cost of each of these options? Are there creative ways to increase our resources? How long do pastoral searches take these days? How are other churches approaching their pastoral vacancies? What do members value most about this church, and what pastoral functions are most important to you? You see, there is a lot of information to gather before deciding even which general direction to head, and we have a small team now that is making phone calls, reaching out to people in other churches and in the Conference office, poring over spreadsheets, and reviewing documents to pull that information together for you.

We are getting an early start on this because some of the options that you might choose would take longer to work out than others. Right now, we are just gathering information. Later in the spring or summer, when all the information is in hand, you will get to chew over all of it and make the decision, as you have in the past, about which direction to go. I won't weigh in on that choice. It will be up to Jesus Christ, the head of this church, and up to all of you.

Now, I imagine that for some of you, the mention of my retirement next year caused your blood pressure to go up a little, and your feeling of comfort and safety to drop. So, this is the time to remind ourselves

that we, individually, and our precious church, are not just in our own hands. We are all in God's hands, and God will bring us safely through this transition.

That is true, even though there will be change. Even though this church won't look and operate and feel in the future exactly as it does today. Even though the next pastor will surely plan and lead worship differently than I do, just as my own worship style is different from Celeste's and Carol's and Earl's. We survived those transitions. We even survived the pandemic with our worship and our fellowship and our mission work intact, because God is with us.

So, what does all this have to do with today's scripture, this odd, uncomfortable passage? It is the story commonly called the "cleansing of the Temple." In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this story comes at the very end of Jesus' ministry, after Palm Sunday. In those three gospels, Jesus' action in the Temple is the final straw that makes the religious authorities determined to arrest and kill him. But here in the Gospel of John, this Temple action comes at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, right after his first, private miracle of turning water into fine wine at a wedding feast.

Here in John, overturning the tables of the money changers and driving them out of the Temple with a whip is the public action that sets the tone for Jesus' ministry to follow. We don't like that image of Jesus, do we – angry, swinging a whip? But you need to know that it is right in line with the kinds of things that Old Testament prophets did all the time - big physical actions to symbolize and announce God's intentions.

Despite what you may have heard in the past, the people Jesus drove out, the money changers and the vendors who sold perfect doves for sacrifice, they weren't doing anything wrong, according to scripture. In fact, their services were absolutely necessary for worship to continue as prescribed in holy text. And – unlike the same story in Matthew, Mark, and Luke – here, Jesus doesn't run them out because they were overcharging for their services.

Rather, as John tells it, Jesus is simply demonstrating in a very physical way – in a prophetic way – that worship is about to change. He is pointing toward that moment, as he later told the Samaritan woman at the well, when worship would take place neither in the Temple in Jerusalem nor on Mount Gerizim in Samaria, but in Spirit and in Truth. That is really good news for us, because we don't live in Israel or in Palestine, and we can't travel to Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim for worship in any average week. Jesus' Temple action broke open centuries of faithful worship and invited all of US into worship, too, even here in little Center Harbor, New Hampshire.

Now, Jesus' overturning tables surely made a lot of people uncomfortable – priests, scribes, money changers, vendors, random pilgrims. We should have some sympathy for them. Their blood pressure probably went up. Their sense of comfort and safety probably dropped. They were happy with worship as it was. They were invested in it. Just as we are invested in our own ways of work and worship.

Like all those people so long ago, we aren't doing anything wrong in the way we worship. We are faithful. But we may – MAY – need to be a different kind of church in the future to be true to Jesus' call to us. I don't know what that looks like, but God does. Maybe we need to recruit Doug Verge to lead a praise band once a month. Maybe Christ is calling us to be a Dinner Church. Maybe we will just be invited to use different words for the doxology when the new pastor arrives. I did that, and we all survived it. I don't know what changes there will be, large or small. I just know there will be some.

So, I ask again, do you trust Jesus Christ? Do you trust him, not just to preserve this church, but to reform and transform it in the coming years in ways we cannot even imagine right now, into a place that shines with God's holy light for all to see? Do you trust him?

Jesus upset a lot of people's apple carts in the Temple that day. He may upset our apple cart, too. And we can be brave about that. So, let us trust in Jesus Christ, the head of our church, who upsets apple carts and opens worship to everyone – even to us. I trust him. Do you?

Amen