

Sermon for March 4, 2018
Series: Love Starts Here
“Love Starts Here: Justice”

John 2:13-22

Qadosh! That is the Hebrew word for “holy.” It literally means set apart, other than. Israel had been set apart as God’s chosen and holy people. God was apart and other than the gods of the nations. The temple itself was set apart to be used only for worship and devotion to God. It was other than the places of the world like the home or the market.

In fact, the Temple’s very architecture was based on this idea of holiness. In the center of the temple was the holy of holies. In that place the Ark of the Covenant was kept and was understood to be the throne on which the one true invisible God dwelt in the mist of Israel. Only the High Priest could enter that area. Next was the court of the priests. Only the Levites who were serving as priests could enter this court. Further out was the Court of Israel. That meant it was the place for the men to worship. Next was the Court of the Women. Only Israelites could enter this court or go beyond. The women would worship in this court. And last was the court of the Gentiles. Anyone who wanted to worship God could enter here. And there were God fearing Gentiles who would come to this place to worship God. They could not go any closer to the Holy of Holies, but they could revere and worship in this part of the temple. We know of some like the Ethiopian Eunuch who travelled a long distance just to enter this outer court and worship God.

So, all of these parts of the temple were meant to be set aside for the worship of God and were other than the market in the streets. In the market people bartered and sold. In the streets they hollered and worked. But in the temple, they prayed and worshipped. The temple was set aside and holy to God. *Qadosh!*

Jesus came to Jerusalem to worship like many other pilgrims and when he arrived at the temple, God’s house, he didn’t find what he expected that day. He expected to hear Psalms being chanted or sung. He expected to see rabbis teaching the Scriptures. He expected to see people kneeling or bowing in prayer. He expected to smell incense and burnt offerings to God. He expected the dwelling place of God to be full of people worshipping God.

But that is not what Jesus found. Instead of Psalms and prayers, he heard the clanging of cow bells and the bleating of sheep and the clanking of coins. Instead of teachers and people kneeling in prayer, he saw buying and selling, making deals and bartering. Instead of the pleasant smells of incense and burnt offerings, Jesus found the foul smells of sweaty animal herders and of sheep and ox excrement. Instead of worshippers, he found people cheating and stealing. The sights, sounds and smells that Jesus encountered were those of the marketplace, not of the temple. The marketplace had taken over the temple and the affairs of the world were conducted within its walls. If it was no longer separated from the world; it was no longer holy.

This was more than Jesus could take. So, Jesus decided to clean it up and make it holy again. He drove out the people selling and their animals. He turned over the tables of the money changers. And he said, “Don’t make my Father’s house a market place.”

This is not the Jesus most of us think of. This is not Jesus meek and mild. This is Jesus angry and indignant. We like the “turn the other cheek” and “blessed are the peacemakers” Jesus. This Jesus is driving out people and turning over tables. This is Jesus raising his voice to the people in the temple. John adds the detail that he even went to the trouble of making a whip to drive out the animals.

We are uncomfortable with this Jesus, but there is an important lesson here. Here we have an example of righteous indignation. Jesus is angry but for righteous and good reasons. Most of the times when people get angry, it is a sinful anger because they want to do harm to others. This, on the other hand, is an anger because of the injustice being done and there is the desire to end the harm being done.

What was this injustice? For one the people had to exchange their money from the Roman coins to Israel's coins because the Roman coins contained graven images. That's fine, but the money changers were known to take an unfair exchange. Perhaps the greatest injustice was what was done to the court of the Gentiles. God was the God of Israel, but God was also the God of all creation. God's temple was supposed to be house of prayer for all peoples. The one part of the temple where Gentiles could worship was turned into a market. Its holiness was desecrated, and Gentiles were excluded from all worship in the temple.

So out of love for Israel and the Gentiles, Jesus was angry.

Love starts here: justice! I know we don't think of justice and love going together. We usually think of them as different things even opposite things. But for God love and justice are two sides of the same coin. Justice and love go together. For those who are being persecuted or hurt, justice puts an end to the torment and is an act of love. In the Old Testament it is often the poor and the widows, those who are powerless that demand justice. Giving them justice is an act of mercy.

In the same way speaking up against injustice or striving against injustice is also an act of love. Seeking justice is an act of love. Sometimes Christians of good faith should get righteously indignant about injustice. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. That love includes trying to free them from their role in injustice. When people act unjustly they are not just hurting other people they are hurting themselves.

Jesus sought to free not only the people who were having to pay the unfair exchanges and the Gentiles who were being denied a place to worship, I believe he was also trying to give the money changers, the sellers, and the priests an opportunity to repent. Then they could be freed from their own oppression.

I had a professor in Seminary that used to talk of God's justice-love. It is the justice that is demanded by truly loving others. Love demands that we stand up for justice. The Old Testament prophet Micah said that God calls us to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. (6:8) Sometimes this means speaking up for justice or taking political stances, but it always means speaking to others in love. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of this parallel between love and justice in his letter from the Birmingham jail. He said, "Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?" For him being an extremist for love was the same as being an extremist for justice.

Justice/love also means acting in love to all people. I believe that Christians should act against injustice, but never in violence. Martin Luther King, Jr. is an example of this. He led a movement of nonviolent action. He opposed unjust laws, but in a non-violent way. Basically, we need to love those committing the injustice as much as we love the victims of injustice.

So, was Jesus violent in the Temple? I would argue that his actions were against things, and not against the people. He drove out the animals and turned over the tables. But having said that, he is God in the flesh. I would argue that this does not justify Christians vandalizing in the name of justice.

We have talked about love being about sacrifice and later will we talk about suffering. It is difficult to talk of love as justice, but as Christians we need to be concerned about the injustices in our world. If we are not, then we are not fulfilling the law to love our neighbor. Jesus shows us that we can be indignant, in a righteous way, about the injustices of the world. Love starts here: Justice.