



## **“Telling It Like It Is”**

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### **Scripture (CEB):**

#### **John 2:13-22**

<sup>13</sup> It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there. <sup>15</sup> He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency. <sup>16</sup> He said to the dove sellers, “Get these things out of here! Don’t make my Father’s house a place of business.” <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it is written, *Passion for your house consumes me.*<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Then the Jewish leaders asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?”

<sup>19</sup> Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple and in three days I’ll raise it up.”

<sup>20</sup> The Jewish leaders replied, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup> But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body. <sup>22</sup> After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

## **Sermon:**

What gives? Who does Jesus think he is, disrupting the worship of the whole Jewish people, during THE most sacred festival in all of Judaism? Passover! Over one million pilgrims flooded into Jerusalem. (according to the ancient historian, Josephus, any how) The temple priests would be slaughtering lambs all afternoon for the thousands of households preparing to remember the story of God's saving hand over them, setting them free from bondage in Egypt, leading them to freedom in a land of milk and honey.

Who does Jesus think he is? Well, that is the point, isn't it?

Jesus, in the gospel of John, knows exactly who he is: the incarnate Word. You know who he is from the very first words of the gospel. Through whom the world was made. (Jn.1:3) The living word of God, the divine Logos, one with God, yet now dwelling among us in grace and in truth. (Jn.1:14)

The Jewish leaders, righteously upset at this troublemaker, this outsider who acts so sacrilegiously, furiously demand, "who do you think you are, creating chaos in worship?" he doesn't look like the divine Logos to them!

But Jesus knows; he knows that he is God's own voice, speaking freedom from bondage, again.

But bondage to what? The gospel of John has often been declared anti-Jewish because of this fury of Jesus at the leaders of the faith.

But it is not the faith of his people he is challenging, it is the rigid, unyielding, straightjacket of religious hegemony and social stratification that he is challenging.

Maybe Jesus is furious at the extortion of the vulnerable population. A lamb is required for Passover. With over one million pilgrims flooding the city and the temple, you can just bet an entire industry was built around this.

To show one's faith and devotion could cost the poor more than they could spare. And such elaborate and expensive worship ritual also meant days of travel, and time spent away from home and fields and flocks and jobs.

Such elaborate ritual also created social hierarchies...only certain folk COULD go to Jerusalem, could support the temple, could pay for the sacrifices, could feel justified in fulfilling all the commands of the law and the temple cult.

An underclass of poor would be on the edges of the faith community.

The world, in religious practice and in life, was a world of the haves, and the have-nots. Insiders, outsiders. The chosen, the rejected.

And Jesus is furious at this. And lashes out at this. Seeks a better way than this.

Worship is “the work of the people” as it is also the work of all creation, as we heard this morning from psalm 19. (“The heavens are telling the glory of God”)

It is joyous and uplifting and liberating. All creation sings! Let all creation worship their Creator!

And let’s look again at what Jesus is saying in the gospel of John about our worship...he points to himself, and through himself to God...saying *THIS*: GOD is the point of worship.

The “temple” of Jesus, unlike the temple built by Herod, is the true temple. It may be torn down by enemies, but it will be “rebuilt” in three days. The place of worship is not static, or geographic; it is not stone or glass, here or there. Jesus is one with God, and knows that God cannot be contained, controlled, manipulated by sacrifice and incense.

In a scant two chapters later, in chapter 4, Jesus will be meeting with a Samaritan woman and he will discuss worship with her also, and declare, “a time is coming and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers God seeks.” (4:23)

That certainly isn’t a lot to go on when planning worship!

It’s a world away from the temple in Jerusalem, and even from our own ordinary concerns...What about the kiddos? What about the offering? What about the doxology, or communion, or corporate confession of sin, or the order of scripture readings? What color should the carpet be? What about the windows? What about pictures, icons, crucifixes, crosses, statues, flowers, dancing, singing?

What should the minister wear? What age shall the minister be? What gender and sexual orientation is acceptable to God?

How much incense shall we use? How big an altar, and even: what sorts of animals shall be butchered on that altar?

The Hebrew scriptures had written it all out in exquisite detail for the Jewish people.

Now Jesus sweeps it away. What is the heart of his worship, our worship? A building? A style of song, of sacrifice, of garments, and incense and prayers??? Would your worship be destroyed if your building was destroyed? The Romans literally tore the Jerusalem temple stone from stone, yet Judaism survived.

Closer to home, we have to look around and say, “oh, hey, is that “your” pew?” Oh, did “your family” buy those hymnbooks? That bible? That pretty window? Oh, is this “your” church?

It is a small step, and an easily taken step, to go from celebrating worship of God, to owning that worship of God, controlling it, making it conform to our wishes, our prejudices.

When I first started worshipping in Protestant churches, my husband Jim would sit next to me and say, “they are doing it wrong”...and at first he didn’t even realize his arrogance in that statement. As a Roman Catholic priest, he was fully indoctrinated in “the right way to worship”! He was sure he knew what was right, and everyone else was wrong! The R. Catholic training is intensive and very detailed regarding every aspect of worship! He had learned it all, and had trouble learning to let it go!

Believe you me, before the United Church of Christ ever accepted his ordination and allowed it to be transferred to the UCC so that he might minister as a UCC pastor, he was tested again and again to be sure he had let go of that attitude!

Because worship is not ours to own; it is our joyful responsibility, our creaturely duty, to let our Creator know of our gratitude for being! And in the UCC it is done in a myriad of ways, and throughout the worshipping world, it is done in countless ways!

Where would we be without the creative, generous passion of God, who made us so astonishingly diverse, so clever, so adorable, so unique and creative and passionate too?

We simply would not be.

And this life, while hard and sad and sometimes terrifying, is also beautiful and amazing and dumbfoundingly glorious. And it is a gift given to us by our awe-inspiring, astounding Maker.

But to sing or pray your thanks, to feel indebted for the gift of life to the Maker of all life...you don’t have to sing only one certain way (praise chorus!), pray in just one language! (Latin!)

You can be comfortable, and happy, in the worship community you find, wherever you find it. This sets your heart free to ease of praise, to jubilant thanks, to acknowledge the gift of finding loving community.

Just don't get *too* comfortable.

For we are reaching for God in our worship! 7.6 billion of us, more or less. Seeking God, most of us, however we understand God.

Reaching, in humility and awe and in wonder. In fear and confusion. In curiosity.

Put your hands in the air, or put your face on the floor...only remember, that Jesus has called us to worship, worship God...not our buildings, not our power or our armies (remember Christian armies? Ah yes!) or our money; not our rightness, not our doctrinal purity, not our stadiums filled for charismatic preachers, not our praise bands, or our fancy organ and choir; not our political action, not our disdain for political action.

Worship God, love Jesus as God's child, give thanks. In spirit and in truth seek God wherever God may be found. And be assured, you will find God.

As Carl Jung so simply, yet eloquently, said, "Bidden or unbidden, God is present."

And that's just telling it like it is.

Jesus says, God's house shall be a house of prayer. He believed he was a house of prayer, a temple of praise.

And that house of prayer and praise is in every one of us, and in all sorts of spaces and places.

God is here, among us, moving through us, and beyond us.

God will not be contained.

Worship, in awe and thanksgiving, in confusion and hope. In tears, in laughter.

Only worship in humility. Pray in whatever way works, just do it.

Be a house of prayer.

Glory be to God! Here in this space, and everywhere else in all creation.

Amen.