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The Wine & the Whip Are Props

Annette Hill Briggs

John 2:13-25

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. ²³ When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Was it a prop or a weapon, this whip of Jesus'? Was his tirade a sermon or a tantrum? Did Jesus lose his temper, or did he do what he did and say what he said according to a plan he'd made before he ever stepped into Jerusalem that day? Because everything more or less depends on how we answer that.

And there are good lessons to preach either way – about biblical justice and all the rest of it . . . *the gospel*, that is. I'm going with the pre-meditation option: that Jesus knew what he'd find in Jerusalem at Passover – and he planned what he'd do about it. He'd find a religious system corrupt to its core, turning a profit on the spiritual neediness of human beings. A system which ought to have been devoted solely to fostering connection between humanity and God was abusing its power to satisfy and enrich itself.

All these thousands of people are in Jerusalem for Passover. *Passover* remembered the Hebrews' escape from Egypt, and so meant freedom from slavery. *Passover* marked the constant presence of God with the people of God – the presence which began at a time when they were on the run from people who meant to kill them. They've come to the Temple to pray and to sacrifice. *Temple* also had layers of meaning:

- ❖ *Temple* was treated as the spot Eden was planted, where humans were first set down on the earth.

- ❖ *Temple* was the place of primal sacrifice, where Abraham took Isaac but then sacrificed the ram.
- ❖ *Temple* was the meeting place of heaven and earth – Jacob's dream, remember?

To celebrate Passover in Jerusalem was the height of any religious Jew's worship experience – to make the sacrifice and say the prayers in the very spot where heaven and earth meet, where God's presence is known most fully. Some might go every year, if they lived close or could afford the trip. Some might go every few years. Some might go once in a lifetime.

Jesus grew up in Galilee. Poor people were HIS people. He sees the Temple courtyard with the eyes of a Galilean. There were hardly any wealthy people anywhere in Israel. No middle class whatsoever, and masses of poor people. Walking for days, they couldn't haul their own animals for sacrifice and expect them to still be ritually pure upon arrival. They were forced to buy animals in Jerusalem, from vendors whose animals were vetted by Temple priests. Cattle and sheep for wealthy people. Doves for poor people.

All those pilgrims came with the currency of their home countries. They had to use Temple coin to buy sacrifice and make offerings. The moneychangers were at their service – for a fee. The vendors rented space, just like at the Farmer's Market downtown. That money also went to the Temple. The vendors got paid in Temple coinage too, then had to turn their money back into local currency to go home. The Temple made a profit on vendors coming and going too. Having changed their money, worshippers would run the gauntlet of vendors to select their animal for sacrifice, then get in line to go in to the priests who were sacrificing the animals.

Rivers of blood were carried away by gutters around the altars built for this exact purpose. It was an assembly line of worshippers carrying live animals in the front, empty-handed worshippers and animal carcasses coming out in two separate lines the other side – for all the days of Passover. Into the courtyard on this day, Jesus arrives with his shopping bag from Michaels or Joann's, with his craft supplies – a needle, thread, and leather straps. He sews and knots the leather into a whip. Does it take an hour? two hours? . . . his disciples no doubt scratching their heads, "*He's sewing?*"

"I'm ready," he says at some point. And stands up. But they weren't – not for what happened next. He cracks the whip and tips over tables. Animals run away and money scatters over the pavement. "*Take the doves out of here,*" he says (caged doves can't run away). "*My Father's house isn't a marketplace.*"

It seems over almost as suddenly as it started. Nobody gets arrested. The police aren't even called. The people in charge want to know what Jesus is up to, asking, "By whose authority are you doing all this?" They want his credentials – which is weird, as if

something depends on his answer, as if they need his reason to measure their own judgment of the situation.

I think they're asking about Rome. Romans did this kind of thing now and then. Best not to get in the way, if this was coming from Rome. See how suddenly NOT IN CHARGE of Jewish religious life they were? How spineless? Having to check the political winds before they can tell right from wrong? Biblical Justice is never more doomed to fail than when religious leadership loses its backbone.

But as soon as Jesus spoke, they knew it wasn't Rome. Rome always had a good reason. Jesus sounds like a crazy person: "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" The Jews then said, "*This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?*" which is all of the actual conversation John records.

Because none of it makes sense to people who don't know Jesus Risen. Even his disciples don't understand any of this – not until after Jesus had risen from the dead, a point driven home again and again by John: that nothing Jesus says or does can be understood outside the light of his resurrection. "*Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up.*" He can only be talking about himself here. The Jews in the story don't know, and thus can only speak of brick and mortar.

While Jesus says, *I AM* and *MY HOUSE*, Jesus is not a pilgrim. He is the host, the one welcoming the pilgrims home, and chastising the servants who are supposed to be helping: providing hospitality and access to the host; straightening and smoothing the crooked, rough places that trip and obstruct the people so desperate to get to him. Great is the temptation to follow the tasty rabbit of economic injustice showing itself here in the Bible and in our own life together.

To imagine the real rot of religion then – or now – look at its habit of confusing value and usefulness. *A new analysis from Georgetown University attempts to document the economic value of religion in U. S. society. It found that the faith sector is worth \$1.2 trillion, more than the combined revenue of the top 10 technology companies in the country, including Apple, Amazon, and Google.* They came up with three numbers for consideration. The first estimate took into account only the revenues of faith-based organizations, which came to *\$378 billion annually. The second estimate, \$1.2 trillion, included the fair market value of goods and services provided by religious organizations and included contributions of businesses with religious roots. The third, higher-end, estimate of \$4.8 trillion takes into account the household incomes of religiously affiliated Americans, assuming that they conduct their affairs according to their religious beliefs.*¹

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<https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/lauretta-brown/georgetown-study-religion-worth-12-trillion-us-economy-more-google-and>.

The argument might be made that \$378 billion would buy a lot of homeless shelters and soup kitchens; that such a system might possibly have failed to grasp Jesus' call to die to the things of this world, take up our cross and follow him; that he might possibly have been misheard by the modern believer. At the same time, we like churches with doors, a roof, an HVAC system and fresh toilet paper. Is it wrong for leaders to ask their members to pay those bills? It's tempting and easier to write off these money changers and vendors as cheats – but who, exactly, is served by that? It is us – is it not? We are the ones served, having gotten off scot free. Our hands and our hearts are clean of any guilt, any responsibility. Then again, if your hands and heart – and mine – are so squeaky clean, what are we doing here?

Year after year, these worshippers returned to Jerusalem, to buy a sacrificial animal, to confess a year's worth of sins to the priest, who slays the animal and confers forgiveness. In the process their pockets got picked and their spirits got shamed, but it was all worth it for the year's worth of reprieve and relief it bought . . . until next Passover. There is the core of the rottenness, you see. The ultimate brokenness of a system that treats symptoms but never the disease. It's the water that sends you back to the well again and again. And the wine that tastes like all the other wine we ever had but never even hinting at what wine is meant to be.

So long as our end game is economic systems, important as they are, we're still living like folks who don't know Jesus Risen. Jesus didn't come to fix the broken system – simply to point out that it was broken? Yeah, he did that with a whip the same way he did that with the wedding wine. But it was not his grand and final goal. He tipped some tables and moved on. It was just a sign of what he'd truly come to do: break up Temple sacrifice once for all. Remember that: once for all.

It's why I march in marches now and then – to be with people who see this world's brokenness and want the truth about it told, if only for as long as we walk together one Saturday a year. I don't think the world broke a year ago either. Only that I woke up from some things I thought were true but aren't. But marching isn't fixing. I am not that naïve.

The only thing that is going to fix this world is what God already did in Jesus. Only through eyes and hearts who know him risen does marching make any sense at all. Not just marching – preaching, singing, worshipping; sitting with people in the nursing home who will still be there tomorrow; feeding people who will be hungry again tomorrow; encouraging the ones who will get overwhelmed and afraid again next week. It's all for nothing if Jesus didn't rise.

The wine and the whip are props, sweet friends. *Signs*, John calls them, for a world we could never imagine otherwise.

Would you pray with me?