

“Come and See - It Might Get Dramatic”

January 21, 2018

Scripture Lesson: John 2: 13-25

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

One of the best continuing education opportunities that I have done was a week long course that I audited at least 10 years ago on Jesus in the movies. It was a chance to watch and discuss various movies that have been made about Jesus and the Jesus story. Some of them sticking very close to the biblical record others being quite loose in interpretation.

One of the scenes that I remember being interpreted quite differently by various directors was the overturning of the tables in the Temple. One of the variables was the degree of anger that Jesus showed in the scene. In some earlier movies, Jesus wasn't very angry. It was almost an accident that the tables were upset. Maybe those directors had gone to Sunday School and learned the hymn, "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild". Other movies had Jesus portrayed in this scene as quite passionate, and angry - a righteous anger that revealed that turning over those table was no accident.

As we continue to move our way through the gospel of John, this story comes very early in the gospel according to John. In Matthew, Mark and Luke - it is found later as one of the last stories in those final days in Jerusalem.

But, John is different. The gospel of John is not constructed as slowly building up to the revealing of the identity and meaning of Jesus. It proclaims from the beginning that Jesus is the Word made flesh. Last week, we heard the story of the wedding at Cana and how water turned into wine - and while a public event, no one saw him do it. This is the next story and it is very clear and very public what Jesus does.

He overturns the tables and I wonder if Nathaneal - who was called to be disciple a couple of stories ago was one of the witnesses. If so, Maybe he is remembering the invitation to Come and See and thinking this journey is getting quite dramatic.

Today we continue our Epiphany exploration through the early stories of John. We latch onto that invitation to Come and See and discern some clues as to how the light of God enlightens the path of our lives as we seek the mystery of what we are meant to do and be. Epiphany is a season, a truth, a theme that invites us to see beyond what we now comprehend.

So, we have this dramatic story where Jesus encounters the religious system and establishment of his time. The temple is the pilgrimage destination of the Jewish tradition and it is expected that

sacrifice will be offered as a way of encountering and knowing God. So, as part of the temple complex there is a marketplace for the selling of sacrificial animals and there are money changers who will change Roman currency into temple currency. It is all part of the system.

And given the formula of high demand, limited supply and human greed, there was probably exploitation. Jesus' recorded words of anger implies as such.

But, is Jesus' anger in this scene only about thieves and robbers? Or, is the main point that the author of the gospel of John making going much deeper? The gospel of John was written about 60 years after Jesus' death and it was written after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. So, it is interesting that as part of this temple story in John we hear this metaphorically conversation about the destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days.

This is John at his best as there are symbolic layers of meaning to his words and this is about a whole lot more than the building named the temple. It is about the dwelling place of God - which is also known in the person and life of Jesus. 60 years later the temple is gone, but Jesus rose on the third day and the resurrected Christ has revealed that the love and truth of God continues beyond any physical structure.

So, I don't think that the meaning of John's story of the overturning the tables in the temple is mainly about his anger at human greed and exploitation. His anger has to do more with the whole system of locating God in one place and having to appease God with an animal sacrifice. He is not just overturning the table of the moneychangers - but overturning the tables of the whole religious system and understanding. And the effects of that are a whole lot more dramatic and more comprehensive than a few coins rolling over the cobblestone floor.

One of the cautions in reading John is that he is quite critical of the Jews and it is important that we read those phrases with a critical eye because it is not a judgement on the whole group of people, but rather a critique of the leadership and dominant way of thinking and being. In the centuries that have passed since this moment in history, both the Christian and Jewish paths have evolved and changed because faith and connection to the Holy and eternal is a living experience that has adapted to new understandings and ways of thinking. That is not to say that within either tradition that there is unity of understanding - since both traditions have various branches of interpretation and practice.

So, what does this cleansing of the temple story mean for us in our time and place? What would Jesus think about the religious system and establishment of our time? What tables, ideas, practices - would Jesus overturn?

That is a tough question to ask because all of what we do is offered as expressions of faithfulness. Yet, one of the most common laments I hear from you and in other places is the disappointment that children and grandchildren are not part of church communities. Our society has shifted in the last 50 years or so regarding the role of the church so we are challenged to find

ways to sustain and find new relevance and connection with the values and interests of our families and communities.

A couple of years ago, I went to the former Northwestern United Church building to pick up some dishes for our kitchen. They were having a dispersal of their goods, as the building was sold to the neighboring mosque. The CBC were there doing a news story on this sale and transfer and once this guy picking up dishes was identified as a minister, I got the opportunity to be interviewed. The reporter asked me if I was upset that a church building was being sold to the mosque. There was a tone to the question that maybe I should be because the Mosque had more people than the Christian church. I said no I wasn't upset. What I said was, "In the 1950's and 1960's it was the model of the United Church to build a church in every neighborhood, and now we find ourselves with too many buildings."

So does something dramatic have to happen? Do we need to refocus?

On the back of the bulletin, there is a description of one of the changes that is proposed within The United Church of Canada. We are in the midst of re-imagining process of how to be the church - beyond the local communities of faith. A few remits were voted on across the church and now implementation is being sorted out. One of those changes is new relationships and boundaries of a region that will replace presbytery and conference. I was on a webinar discussion about these boundaries this week and there is a degree of angst about changes - part of that is there are still a lot of unknowns, but also part of it is imagining all that presbytery does now in a larger area. But, we aren't going to be able or have to do everything we are doing now. It is hard to change the imagination of an institution.

One of the important shifts that I see and hope will happen is a shift in purpose of the regional level of the church from an oversight /policing role - making sure policies and procedures are followed to more a resourcing role. What can the regional church do to help enable the ministry and mission of local congregations. How can the regional level of the church bring together communities of faith with common ideas and dreams to find ways of being faithful?

And that shift will be aided by communities of faith being clearer about who they are and what is the focus of their ministry and mission?

As a congregation we are in the midst of Mission Forward process and those of us who are involved in that process realize that there are questions about what is happening and why? We had the gathering in October that was helpful in clarifying our strengths and blessings. Now, we are involved in community consultation process of listening and discerning needs and opportunities in the community. We will be working to combine that information in March to see if there are areas of focus and part of that will also be discerning if there are things we need to stop doing in order to direct our time, energy and resources to the defined needs and dreams.

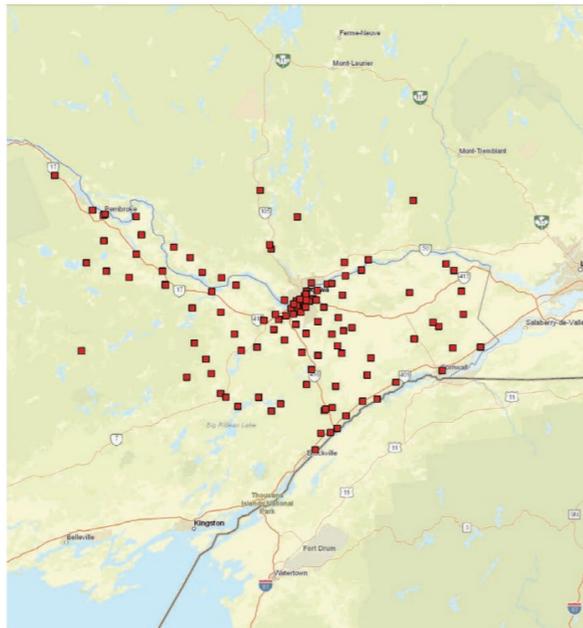
We don't know yet where that will lead - but that's okay because part of this following Jesus endeavour is trust and traveling into the unknown with an openness and confidence that we will find our way. As a church we are more than an institution, we are a people on the Way and I believe it is easier to change the imagination of a people who are open to walking, evolving and growing together.

We don't know how dramatic it will be - but part of that depends on our definition and expectations of dramatic? It might not be very dramatic visually - we might not have to get a special effects director for the movie - but what we long for, work for and pray for are effects that are dramatic spiritually, as we seek meaning and hope, as we learn and learn anew the mystery of what we are meant to do and be.

So for now we hear the echo of the invitation, Come and See ...

Regional Council / Conseil régional

The United Church of Canada is in a process of moving from 84 presbyteries and 13 conferences to a system of regions - which will be the intermediary body between communities of faith and the national church. The boundaries for 17 regions have been proposed - and Ottawa is in Region 13. Here is a map of the proposed region:



Description of Regional Council 13 - There are Approximately 120 Pastoral Charges within our Regional Council - **Upper Valley Presbytery**, the seven pastoral charges located in Lanark County (Carleton Place: Zion-Memorial, Rideau Ferry: Bethel PC, Lanark-Balderson, Perth-St. Paul's, Smiths Falls: Trinity, Bathurst, Boyd's-Franktown), **Ottawa Presbytery**, **Seaway Valley Presbytery**, and l'Église Saint-Marc (CL)

These boundaries will be finalized in March and will come into effect on January 1, 2019.