

“Jesus Calls BS”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Lent 3B

Exodus 20:1-17

John 2:13-22

The story of Jesus overturning the money-changers' tables in the Jerusalem Temple happens in all four gospels. Therefore, it must be pretty important. So come with me, and let's take a visit back in time to the Second Jerusalem Temple. This is the Temple that Herod the Great began rebuilding in 20 BCE, later finished in 64 CE by Herod Agrippa-- only to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and used as a worship place for Roman gods.

To imagine the scale of the Jerusalem Temple, picture borders that begin with our church and its parking lot, going up Leonia Ave. to the end of the block, at the corner with Woodridge Place to the north, passing by Fumio and Hoshiko's home on Woodridge to the corner of Broad Ave. To the east, the border goes up Fort Lee Road to Broad Ave. This is not an exact scale, but we are dealing with about the same amount of space. Wood Park would be the inner courtyards of the Temple, meant only for Jews. Everything surrounding the borders of Wood Park would be the Court of the Gentiles. In the Court of the Gentiles, you could change your money at Provident Bank or Bank of America from Roman coin into shekels; coins bearing the Roman Emperor were forbidden in the Temple. Once you changed your money, you could go to BonChon Chicken, Dante's, or BB Bakery to buy the animals you would sacrifice. Depending on your wealth, and the kind of offering you needed to make, you could buy pigeons, sheep, cattle. You wanted to be sure to buy from these vendors, not only

because you have been traveling very long distances to worship over Passover at the Jerusalem Temple, but also because the animals sold along Broad Ave.-- though much more expensive than the animals back home-- were sure to pass muster with the priests. The Firehouse stored the fuel that would be used for the sacrifices.

There are big Leonia “Do Not Enter!” signs surrounding Wood Park, and if you read the small print below you will see the exceptions: unless you are an Israelite. Once you entered Wood Park, the baseball field, basketball court and tennis courts made up the Women’s Court. Men could go in there too, and this is where alms to the poor could also be made. One corner of the Women’s Court-- the tennis practice wall-- was the section where lepers were contained. The three playgrounds and the grassy space between them would be the Court of Israel. However, only circumcised Jewish males could enter the Court of Israel. The parking lot between the playgrounds and the library held the Court of the Priests. Only Levite Priests could inhabit this section, which also included the Altar where sacrifices were made-- found where the Police Precinct is located. You’ll find the Sanctuary where the Library is, and again only priests could enter this, for it is where the Holy of Holies is located, which contains the Torah scrolls, and where it is believed that the *kabod*, or glory of God, is located.

Everything had its place. Every class of people had their place. Even God had God’s place.

But Jesus upended everything. He sent dollar bills flying all over Provident Bank and trampelled them. He covered the floor of Dante’s with their entire supply of pizza sauce. They had just coated the wings at BonChon with their delicious garlic soy but Jesus stormed in and crashed those trays of chicken against the wall. Then he turned over the coffee urns at BB Bakery and left plump boba pearls bouncing out the door. The Leonia Talks Listserv lit up in a blaze, and even the New York Times crossed the river to report a story on this raging, raving prophet.

Who is this Jesus? Who is this reckless and wasteful Jesus? Who is this angry Jesus? What happened to the meek and mild Jesus we love? What happened to the “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” Jesus? Surely Jesus wouldn’t like to have hot coffee thrown in his face?! And isn’t this the same Jesus who as a boy seemed so at home in the Temple, talking with the teachers, that he stayed behind in Jerusalem instead of joining his parents’ caravan home, and was lost to them for three days? What about the Jesus who-- half a chapter earlier in John-- was the life of the wedding party and changed water into wine? (By the way, that wine would probably sell really well at Andres’ Wine and Spirits.) What flipped for Jesus, besides the tables of the money changers?

Jesus was calling BS in the Temple. BS is an abbreviation that means Bull Excrement. We have heard this phrase in recent weeks, thanks to a speech by Emma Gonzalez, high school student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. I quote the tail-end of her speech:

“Politicians who sit in their gilded House and Senate seats funded by the NRA telling us nothing could have been done to prevent this, we call BS. They say tougher guns laws do not decrease gun violence. We call BS. They say a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun. We call BS. They say guns are just tools like knives and are as dangerous as cars. We call BS. They say no laws could have prevented the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred. We call BS. That us kids don't know what we're talking about, that we're too young to understand how the government works. We call BS.”¹

Surely there was *literal* BS in the Jerusalem Temple-- how could there not be with all that animal sacrifice? Jesus did not actually care about where or how the animals were relieving themselves. What he cared about was that the whole enterprise of Temple sacrifice-- even in its passion for honoring

¹ Speech by Emma Gonzalez, Fort Lauderdale, Feb. 17, 2018

God-- was creating false idols by displacing a true relationship with God and God's people with a relationship focused on money, power and things. If you look at the introduction God gave to Moses before launching into the Ten Commandments, God says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann said of this verse, "The word 'Egypt' refers to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh is the abusive, brutalizing king of Egypt who practiced and exploited a concentration of power and wealth. You will notice that we do not know Pharaoh's name and that is because Pharaoh keeps turning up in our history time after time. So, Pharaoh is the right name for every brutalizing concentration of wealth and power that acts in violence against vulnerable people. The Exodus is the powerful acknowledgement of that brutalizing domain of human history from which we have been emancipated."²

Jesus' disciples who were with him remembered a verse from Psalm 69:9: "Zeal for your house will consume me." Now we must remember that John's gospel was written no earlier than 90 CE, a good 20 years or so after the Second Jerusalem Temple was destroyed. The secular historian Josephus, who was alive at the time, described, "Round the Altar the heaps of corpses grew higher and higher, while down the Sanctuary steps poured a river of blood and the bodies of those killed at the top slid to the bottom."³ Seeing Jesus' action through this lens, we know that in his fit of rage, Jesus is foreshadowing an even more dreadful event than dollar bills on the floor and pizza sauce everywhere. Jesus' action is a bit of performance art, much like the sign acts in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Rome is going to destroy you-- and you're worried about pizza sauce and trampled dollar bills? Jesus is calling their BS.

² Walter Brueggemann, "Strategies for Staying Emancipated" Sermon for Lent 3B on *Day1.org*

³ Peter Schafer, *The History of Jews in Antiquity*: Routledge, 1995 pp. 191-192

The message still speaks to us today, because we still find ourselves caught up in the mire of BS and we still find ourselves captive under today's Pharaoh's rule.

Jesus, who defied the borders of ritual law when he healed a hemorrhaging woman when she touched him, Jesus, who reached out his hand to the leper, calls BS when we say "Build that Wall."

Jesus, who said the last will be first and the first will be last, calls BS when we say "America First."

Jesus, who said about children, "It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble," calls BS when we say that we cannot--will not-- make smart gun laws that will protect children and youth and their teachers while they are in school, and for that matter in church, or at home. Jesus calls BS when we defile the Ten Commandments and make guns our gods, and when our guns make us like gods-- holding in our hands the power of life and death, a power that should only belong to God. Did you see last week that a Pennsylvania church had a blessing ceremony for AR-15 Rifles? I am not joking when I say that in some pockets of this country, the love of guns surpasses the love of God and God's law. These pockets have loads of money and power. But Jesus is calling BS!

I would be mistaken if I were to lead you to believe that Jesus called BS for only political reasons. Jesus had a deeply spiritual motivation for his actions at the Jerusalem Temple. He was showing a way that connection with God could last-- far longer than the Temple walls would last. Jesus' body would become a sanctuary for God. And to those who would destroy Jesus' body, he calls BS: "Destroy *this* temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

When we welcome Jesus into our lives, our bodies also become a sanctuary where God can live. We can meet and visit God, whether we are woman or man, insider, outsider, leper or lesbian, merchant or beggar, Jew, Gentile, in the Temple or in Teaneck, elder or adolescent, sinner or saint, for Jesus has already broken down the walls that keep us away from God. Our bodies are not for Pharaoh's domination, but for God's dwelling. Don't say your body is not good enough to host God; ...you know what Jesus would say to that! Amen.