

## “Hidden Faults”

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Psalm 19      John 2:13-22

How do you get a point across to someone who doesn't seem to hear?

Many years ago, my husband Tom and I had a feud over the shut-off valve for the shower. He would take a shower, and then turn the water off without closing the shower valve. So the next time someone turned the water on, it would come pouring out from above, rather than from the faucet below. And unsuspecting people, like me, would get sprayed with cold water when we went to take a bath, or wash something in the tub. Whenever this happened, I would walk up to Tom, dripping wet, and beg him to turn the valve off, when he turned off the water. He would apologize and promise to remember.

But inevitably someone in the house, me, one of the kids, a guest, would get soaked again. This went on for years until one evening I had had enough. Tom happened to be lying peacefully in bed, when I marched into the room, dripping with water. But this time I had a bucket. I stood over him while he begged for mercy. But I was angry, and I poured cold water all over him. The bucket wasn't full, but it was enough water to make a lasting impression. After that, we never had a problem with the shower valve.

Sometimes words are not enough. You have to actually do something to get people to really understand. That's why Jesus healed people as part of his teaching. He spoke words of power, but he also showed that power with healings and other miracles.

In the gospel lesson that Dina read this morning, Jesus carried out a dramatic demonstration in the Temple. Everybody knew the corrupt business there. The Jewish leaders of the Temple, the Sadducees, made a good profit from Temple business. Visitors had to exchange their Roman coins for Jewish money, because people were only allowed to use Jewish money in the Temple. Then, people would use the money to buy pigeons or other animals for sacrifice.

It's not that changing money or selling animals was necessarily bad. Devout Jews would not want to use the Roman coins with Caesar's image on them, especially in the Temple. And it made sense to sell animals for sacrifice, because not everyone raised livestock anymore, and also because people traveled to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire, and it wasn't convenient to bring animals for such a long distance. The Sadducees were not breaking any of the Ten Commandments. But it's possible to keep all the rules and still do wrong. The fact is, they were exploiting foreigners, especially poor people, who were the ones who would end up buying the inexpensive pigeons at an inflated price. People knew the religious leaders were taking advantage of them. And they probably grumbled and complained about it. But nothing changed.

So when Jesus first entered Jerusalem, he marched into the Temple and found the money changers seated at tables, and people selling cattle, sheep and doves. And in a deliberate act of protest, he made a whip of cords, and drove everyone out, along with their animals. He flipped the tables over, and poured coins out of their containers. And only then did he say, “Stop making God’s house into a marketplace!”

We don’t usually think of Jesus as expressing anger and acting up. But this story is found in all four gospels, and it stays with us. Jesus saw greed and abuse of power in God’s house, and he was angry. He didn’t just open his mouth and say “This is wrong.” Would anyone have listened to him? I imagine others had already said the same. Instead he got everyone’s attention with a display of anger. This was not a temper tantrum. He was angry, but this was an action calculated for effect. And Jesus didn’t single out individuals for blame. He objected to the whole unjust system. And he let people know, with conviction and passion.

Many of us are not comfortable with displays of passionate anger. Remember last year when people were rioting and demonstrating in response to police shootings and choke hold deaths of black people in our country? Many white people were uncomfortable with the demonstrations. I heard some say, I understand they are angry, but they shouldn’t demonstrate; it only strains relations with the police further; they should wait for the courts to decide. When the courts decided, officers were either not indicted, or found not guilty of violating civil rights. But these demonstrations were not just about individual cases. They expressed frustration and anger with a larger, more systemic problem.

And we saw some of that last Wednesday when the Justice Department released a report that revealed a pattern of racial bias in the Ferguson police department. They discovered racist jokes in government email accounts. And when they reviewed 35,000 pages of police records and analyzed race data compiled for every police stop, they found that when the police used force, it was almost exclusively against blacks, and they regularly stopped black people without probable cause. Minor, largely discretionary offenses such as disturbing the peace and jaywalking were brought almost always against blacks and not whites. When whites were charged with these same crimes, they were likely to have their cases dismissed.\*

As was the case in the Temple in Jesus’ time, it’s possible to keep all the rules, and still do wrong. And if people just sit around and talk about it, who will pay attention? When the whole system is wrong, sometimes you have to shake people up to get them to notice. Sometimes you have to invade comfort zones, pour a bucket of water, turn over some tables, to get people to understand.

The fact is, most police officers do not set out to discriminate against people of color. But even people of good will have some unconscious racial prejudice, and there are all sorts of psychological tests to prove it. You can even take them on line. I took one twice, and both times it showed I had a moderate to strong preference for European Americans compared to African Americans. I’m not overtly prejudiced. But I may not

notice prejudiced thoughts or behaviors because they're unconscious and subtle. And as long as they stay unconscious, I probably won't change.

The Psalm that David read this morning speaks of the perfect law of the Lord that enlightens and revives the soul, and brings wisdom to simple people. And then the Psalmist says, "But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults." Sometimes we think we're doing good, but our faults and sins are hidden from us. It may be hard for us as individuals, or as a nation, to relate to the money changers and those who sold sacrificial animals in the Temple. But in the midst of racial tension, we can relate to the Psalmist's lament that he is guilty of secret sins, sins and prejudices that even he might not be aware of.

How can we detect our faults when we only see things from our own point of view? Sometimes it takes someone completely different from us, someone we didn't grow up with in our families, to help us understand our blind spots and sins. For example, in a marriage, a partner is not part of our family of origin, yet he or she is a person we live with intimately. That person may see things we never noticed on our own, things we may take for granted as the way things are. If we get defensive and refuse to listen, we lose an opportunity to learn and grow. But if we allow ourselves see through another person's eyes, we have the opportunity to change and become better people.

Likewise, sometimes it takes different kinds of people in a church, to help us realize that there are different ways to worship or be together as a community, and we may be missing something by thinking that our way is the only or best way. And sometimes it takes other groups in our community or nation to point out our blind spots and failings. That doesn't mean we are altogether bad or wrong. It just means we need outside help to detect our errors and discover our secret sins. If we refuse to listen and insist we are fine, that we are right, that we know everything already, we may miss the point of life, of worship, of being together as people in this world.

Today we gather at the table of our Lord. At this table, everything is turned upside down. The rich are poor, the weak are strong, the old are young, and our hidden faults are not hidden before God. Yet absolutely everyone is welcome. May we come with open hearts and minds, eager to listen and change. And may the words of our mouths, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable to God, who is our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

\* "Ferguson Police Routinely Violate Rights of Black, Justice Dept. Finds," by Matt Apuzzo, The New York Times, March 3, 2015.