

“Confrontation and Compassion”
October 10, 2021

Jeremiah 7:1-11
John 2:13-22

On recent Sundays, I’ve been exploring various ways that we might engage with people when we disagree with them. Together we’ve considered silence, listening, and questioning—looking at how Jesus used these approaches at different times and thinking about their possibilities for us today.

Sometimes, however, we feel that the stakes are so high, the issue so important that none of these options will suffice. We need something more direct, more *confrontational*.

In our increasingly divided and polarized nation, confrontation is increasing as well. Protestors leave public spaces to confront people in restaurants or their homes or, as happened this past week, following a US Senator into a restroom to make their point. School board meetings are being described as “battlegrounds” with shouting matches and fights erupting over mask mandates and the content of curriculum.

Violence and property destruction have become new means of “dialogue” as those on the left and the right *confront* their opponents.

Going too far?

Not going far enough?

As we consider our current situation, we remember the time Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem, took a whip, drove the animals out, and overturned the tables, scattering the coins of the money changers.

Now that’s confrontation! And shouldn’t we try to be more like Jesus?

The more we reflect on this story, however, the more difficult it becomes for us—which happens a lot when we look at and listen to the things Jesus does and says. As we struggle to understand the importance of this story for us today, new insights and new possibilities for our lives and our relationships also open to us.

All four Gospels tell some version of this story. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell it as part of the story of the last days of Jesus’ earthly life. Matthew and Luke suggest that it happened on Palm Sunday. Mark says that it happened the next day—on Monday.

This morning we heard John’s account of Jesus entering the temple in Jerusalem. With a different purpose, John puts this story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Now, the temple complex covered a large area, some thirty acres. Thousands of people could—and did—fit into it at any time. And during festivals such as Passover those numbers would swell. Imagine, someone down at the corner of Washington and Clinton shouting in anger at the

top of his or her lungs—here in this sanctuary, we might not even be aware of that. So, when the Gospels tell of this event, of Jesus stopping all the action—well, it is probably an exaggeration.

What is not exaggerated, however, is the vehemence of this confrontation.

John gives us a vivid story: take in the smell of the animals, hear the cries of the people, watch as the cattle are driven out, the coins are scattered, rolling across the floor, and falling.

Then listen as Jesus shouts into the shocked silence: “Take these things out of here!”

Obviously, this was something other than Girl Scouts selling cookies at church on a Sunday morning. What’s going on here? What’s the problem?

When we hear a story like this, we must always remember that Jesus was a Jew. He kept the Sabbath. He participated in the religious festivals. He and his followers worshipped in the temple. As with the prophets, Jesus’ criticism, his confrontation were addressed in love to his own people.

We should also remember, as the New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, tells us, that unlike the quiet, decorous churches that we are all too familiar with, the temple was crowded, loud, and boisterous. Especially during festivals, it was a place of happiness and celebration.

The Passover was a pilgrimage festival. People would come to Jerusalem from great distances in order to make a sacrifice in the temple. Most likely, however, they would not bring a sacrificial animal with them. So, they would buy an animal—a cow, a sheep, a bird—at the temple.

All of this took place in the section of the temple called the Court of the Gentiles. Gentiles, people from everywhere, were welcome in the Temple because it was indeed a “house of prayer for all nations.” God’s *Torah* was clear: “love the stranger who dwells among you, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Those who sold the animals were facilitating the proper and acceptable worship of God.

Of course, the pilgrims usually would arrive at the temple carrying Greek or Roman coins that bore the likeness of the emperor on them. These could not be used to pay the temple tax, so money changers were there—again to help pilgrims in their worship of God.

This was worship that worked.

And along comes Jesus, who throws this whole system into chaos as major religious holiday approaches. Turning over the tables, he shouts to those within hearing distance: “You have made this into a den of robbers.” Contrary to what popular imagination, tinged with some antisemitism, might tell us, the robbing wasn’t being done in the temple and the robbers were not the money changers or the sellers of animals.

Again, Amy-Jill Levine tells us that a robbers’ den is the place where robbers go to feel safe, comfortable. She invites us to consider people who benefit from their elite status at the expense of others and who come to a place of worship only to find comfort and assurance—these are the robbers. This happens not just in ancient temples but in contemporary churches. Those who take from the poor, those who put themselves above others because of their race or financial standing

or intellectual ability—such are those who seek safe haven in a den of robbers—a place of easy assurance and cheap grace.

When Jesus confronted all of this and turned over the tables, most people saw a disrupter.

The disciples looked at the angry Jesus and what did they see?

John doesn't tell us.

What John does tell us is that *after* the resurrection, the followers of Jesus remembered what he said. They remembered what he did. They could look back on that chaos, on the turmoil, on the uncertainty and see that God was at work in this man and in this event.

In the middle of all this trouble, Jesus announces: “Destroy this temple and I will raise it up again in three days.”

No one understood what he was talking about.

Some thought he was referring to the great stone building that had taken 46 years to build.

Not even his disciples understood Jesus at the time.

In the coming years they would watch as he healed the sick, fed the hungry, restored the broken, and forgave the sinner. Those who watched and followed Jesus would come to understand that God's will for creation is fullness of life. This is the case with our own slow growth in God's love as well. It takes time to see and understand: in God's love your pain is met, acknowledged, and healed. This is a love that desires your wholeness even while you are broken. This is a love that seeks the peace of the world, even while we are engulfed in violence.

It was only after Jesus' own violent death that his followers came to realize that he wasn't talking about stones that day in the temple. Jesus was speaking of his own body. He spoke that day of resurrection—the power of God overcoming death.

And this is where the story comes back around to meet our own lives.

This story does not endorse the way of violent, aggressive confrontation. It does not invite us to harass or intimidate. It gives us no certainty about the righteousness of our cause or our belief nor about our virtue in promoting it.

In his actions and his words at the temple, Jesus points toward what God is doing and will do: lifting up the lowly and creating new possibility—resurrection—in the midst of all that would destroy.

This is confrontation that speaks most of all not about what is wrong but about what *might be*.

Confrontation seeks to get the problem, the disagreement out in the open. That's important. But when we watch as Jesus confronts people in the temple—and elsewhere during his ministry—we keep seeing, not attack, not belittling, but hope and new opportunities.

When we chose confrontation, let it be confrontation with compassion, an encounter that recognizes the brokenness of all involved, both those confronted *and* those who are confronting. Without this, confrontation will fail.

Let confrontation be an encounter that offers new possibility, new relationship, new life to all involved.

Let it speak to us, as Jesus does in the temple, of the resurrection that God makes possible among us even now.