

January 21, 2018 – Epiphany 3 -- John 2:13-25

“The Presence of Christ: Flipping Tables is Always an Option” – Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

One of my favorite artists is a woman named Jenny Holzer. She has been around since the early 1990s, and she made her name, in the beginning, by putting up flyers in strategic places around cities with sayings that she made up on them. This is a kind of performance art called ‘culture-jamming’. Culture-jamming is any act that forces people to pay see through their consumption of products, their spending, what they think is being done by a beloved institution. Most often, culture-jammers do this through advertising methods – billboards going up at night along highways into the city, graffiti put in strategic places (like Banksy in Europe), or public actions. “No Pants Day” on the New York subway is a good example, because it is done during fashion week.

Jenny Holzer always aims big. Her signature act is to set up LED light boards in front of city halls and government buildings, or project giant sayings on shopping buildings or international banking institutions. In Chicago in 2008, she projected onto the City Hall this saying: *Whatever you say reverberates/ Whatever you don't say speaks for itself/ So either way you're talking politics.* Another one, in Sienna, before an international meeting in 1999, she projected onto the meeting place: *Abuse of power comes as no surprise/Action causes more trouble than thought.*

Holzer wants us to stop, to be shocked by the event, its location, and the words in such a way that we reflect on what we are doing and what others are doing. This works best when the culture-jamming happens in a place we take for granted, where we are so used to the way things are, we don't even think about what we are doing, until someone calls our attention to it.

John's Gospel was written after the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70AD. Unlike the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John places this event at the Temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

The Gospel of John is concerned with signs. Today, John places that concern with the Jewish authorities. “*What sign will you show us?*”, they ask, completely missing that Jesus' act of emptying the Temple itself is a sign. Jesus answers them by saying, “*Destroy this temple and I will build it up again in three days*”. The authorities believe Jesus is talking about the actual building, but John clarifies for us that everything Jesus does is pointing to his resurrection after his death on the cross.

²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

John, though, does not make it clear why Jesus does this to the animals and money changers. Jesus is using shock and performance to point people to a deeper understanding. Jesus is culture-jamming the Temple and the Jewish authorities, who have rigged the system to keep people from accessing God. Clearing out the Temple is a sign that Jesus is looking for ways to make God more accessible to us rather than less accessible.

One of the ways the Temple was limiting access to God was through the market of sacrifice that had built up at the Temple gates. The other Gospels have Jesus calling the marketplace a *den of thieves*, but Jesus in John's Gospel says, *Stop turning my father's house into a market*.

The thing is, the market is sort of necessary, because during Passover people need to sacrifice at the Temple, and they need animals to do that. If you travel from far away, you can't bring your cow, goat, or doves, so you would have to buy your sacrifice at the Temple gate. And in order to buy the animal, you would have to change your money. At the gate to the Temple, then, there was a flourishing, active, loud, swarming market of moneychangers and people selling animals during Passover.

This creates a lot of questions, doesn't it? Is this market and exchange necessary? Based on the commands of Scripture going all the way back to Deuteronomy, and the long-standing traditions of the Jewish religion, it sure seems necessary. It has been in place for hundreds and hundreds of years. The story does not give us much to go on.

If it is necessary, why does Jesus trash the place? Is he angry? It seems like an angry act. There are even whips! But nothing in the text says Jesus is angry.

This is why I think we need to think of Jesus' flipping of tables and chasing out the animals in the way John presents it – as a sign. This is what the text tells us. If it is a sign, I think it is best to think of it like a sort of Jenny Holzer culture-jamming act. Jesus means for us to ask those questions, to challenge long-standing ideas of the way we think things should be.

And here is the most important question Jesus' culture-jamming act brings up: *What are the barriers we put in place to access God? Or, why are there barriers in place to being in relationship with God?*

The answer to that question is not for Jesus to answer, because Jesus is the way in which people access God, especially after the Resurrection. Instead, Jesus is the sign that leads us to the answer to the question.

There is a long history of culture-jamming and performance art in Israel's history. Think of Jeremiah taking clay pots into the town square, holding them over his head and declaring the Israelites to be God's people, then smashing the pots in front of the crowd. Or what about Isaiah preaching nude to show the vulnerability of the people before God? Or Hosea, who turns his whole life into a morality play for how God loves even the unfaithful and idolatrous? Once we understand the Old Testament prophet as, in part, a performance artist and culture-jammer, many things begin to make sense, and so it is with the scourging of the Temple.

And so, when Jesus says, *You are turning my father's house into a market*, the problem isn't markets in and of themselves; it is that the market as it is set up keeps people from accessing God's presence. The market and the ways of the market have taken precedence over the people themselves. The market has disempowered the people and essentially locked them out.

Like most markets that are heavily controlled, this market at the temple had become a cutthroat center of competition, with exorbitant fees and exploitative charges.

You are a typical farmer or fisherman and you are fulfilling your religious obligations by bringing your family to the Holy City to worship at the Temple. As you get closer to the city, you join up with other families and all of you travel together. You are excited about this

journey. It may have been years since you have been able to make it. Everyone around is also excited. The greeting, “*See you next year up in Jerusalem*”, is finally being fulfilled.

And then you get to the Temple. To get into the Temple, you must buy a goat, which you planned on because one needs to sacrifice to the Lord. You need to change over your money from the Roman coinage to the Temple coinage, so you go to the money-changer. You think to yourself, “*This is just a change from one value to another, with a processing fee tacked on*”, but to your surprise there are all these other fees tacked on. It eats into the money you need for food while on this trip. It is the same with the goat. You look back at the gate to the Temple and you see people much less financially solvent than you turning away. To journey all that way and not be able to access the presence of God in the Temple of the faith.

Does this seem right?

It didn't to Jesus.

What are the barriers that have been built up to govern, maintain, control how people come before God? How have we as a church done that? Where would Jesus flip over tables today?

Perhaps Jesus saw this scene at the Temple and remembered the Prophet Zechariah's words:

20 On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, 'Holy to the LORD.' And the cooking-pots in the house of the LORD shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar; 21 and every cooking-pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day. (14:20-21)

At the end of our reading, John writes, “*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.*”

What does Jesus know about what is in everyone? Perhaps Jesus saw what was happening at the Temple and knew that, in the heart of all people, there is the desire to be in the presence of God. Psalm 51 says,

*10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

*11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

*12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

*15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

*16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.*

*17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

*18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,*

19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,

*in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Notice in the Psalm that being in the presence of God comes before the 'right sacrifices' at the Temple. But now, in Jesus' day, the bureaucracy of sacrifice has been put before the presence of God. The people are disempowered, and the system of worship at the Temple has placed the supposed needs of the market over the people.

Jenny Holzer is quite right: *Abuse of power comes as no surprise; Action causes more trouble than thought.*

Jesus culture-jams access to the Temple, and the way people believe we come into God's presence. This is Jesus' performance art piece of resistance. The sign Jesus shows the Jewish authorities is the act itself, in direct lineage from the prophets of old. It is a sign that the present system, the present way of thinking, does not help people do what the Temple is supposed to do, which is help people know the presence of God. Jesus also points ahead to another sign – his Resurrection. Jesus at once points to what is wrong at the Temple, and at the same time points to himself as the new Temple, a momentous move from place to person.

Paul recognizes this in 1 Corinthians 3:

16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

In the Resurrection, Jesus becomes the presence of God all people seek. In the gift of the Holy Spirit, we become the presence of God for all people. In this way, Jesus becomes the great performance artist, culture jammer, and prophet. Sometimes, flipping tables and pulling out a whip changes everything. Sometimes, it is the best of all possible options. Because through Jesus Christ all things change forever, and the biggest change is how we come before God. We now have full access to the Lord, because the Lord is already present with us. The Temple, whether it is in Jerusalem, in Christ, or in us, is now a sign of God's constant presence with us, not the place in which we access God.

We who gather today do not come to church to access the presence of God; we come here to remember and give thanks with each other that God is always present with us. We know this through the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross and the power of his Resurrection. Amen.