

Christ's Call to the Christian: Distinguish Yourself

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“The Passover of the Jews was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves. And the money changers were seated at their tables. Making a whip of cord, he drove all of them out of the temple and the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here. Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ Then the Jews said to him: ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years and will you then raise it up in three days?’ But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. After 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 2: 13-22)

I promise you that I will tell you a good story on another Sunday. This Sunday I think it requires our working together a little harder than usual, and I think I must speak. Must, because I am constrained; I don't think I have a choice. I cannot turn on the national news except absolutely every single story that comes is of the war. Last night, the ABC national news had not one story that was not related to the war. And this morning I woke up at 4:30 and turned on NPR and there was no jazz, there was the BBC, talking about the war – minute-by-minute descriptions of what was going on. That is to say, as a citizen of this country I can't help but pay attention to these most dire and overwhelming acts in the world now. Even so, I thought I could possibly avoid it. There are other texts here. But when I most seriously came upon this gospel lesson, then I was constrained and choices were taken away from me. You understand, don't you, that whenever Christians talk about the righteous anger of Jesus, this is the text they refer to? This story: the cleansing of the temple. You understand that when Christians talk about Jesus taking righteous anger action, arguing that we are permitted to take some action in judgment, this is the text that they refer to. This story appears in all the gospels – the three synoptics as well as in John with some variations; but it's pretty obvious this was a story told early and often about the Lord Jesus Christ. I am constrained. Please let me make some things clear in the

beginning. I do not intend to talk to our government about its policies or about the execution of those policies. I don't really have that wisdom and they are not here anyway. I do, however, intend to talk to you – you, my brothers and my sisters who are

Christians and thereby distinguish yourselves somewhat from the general population of any nation anywhere; you who call upon the name of the Lord, who define yourselves by the person and the action and forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ. I will talk to you. To you I think this text is applicable.

We may surely live within a country which is at war. As active and honorable citizens of that country we may live within its mind – the mind of a country at war and within its reasons and within its systems and within its justifications. And called, we go. And when those whom we love are called, they go and take our hearts with them. We may surely—and we must—live in a nation which is at war as its active citizens. But Jesus calls us to distinguish ourselves, and therefore we cannot make the minds and the reasons and the systems and the justifications of this country our highest obedience. By our very self-definition as Christians, there is only one who requires absolute obedience of us. Only one. And that is the Lord Jesus Christ. That doesn't have to mean that we are in disharmony with what a nation does. But it does mean that we need persistently to be aware of this higher calling which may sometimes distinguish us so that we become those who might reveal the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ in these times. So that we might become those who might reveal the reasons of our Lord in these times, and the systems that the Lord has set up within the world and between us and God in the world at these times, and we must obey the justification which we have in Christ in these times. That's what I must tell you because of this text. For Jesus Christ is our highest pattern of activity, and we can find his pattern in this story; and Jesus Christ has purified us so that whatever action we take in his pattern might be done in humility and righteousness, not in arrogance. And Jesus Christ has empowered us so that we are able to act for the love and the goodness of this nation of which we are citizens but in which we distinguish ourselves. That's what I would like to declare this morning and all I am doing is passing on to you this story.

In John, the story is divided into two parts. First you have the event and then following the event you have meaning behind the event—meaning, interestingly enough, which nobody understood at the moment about what Jesus was doing, but which people could begin to understand after his death and after his resurrection.

Let's take the story first so that we can kind of see it. Jerusalem in the days of Jesus was a fairly thriving and significant capitol city. Throughout the year it had in its citizenship between twenty-five to thirty thousand people. That's a very large city in the days of Jesus Christ. There are only a few that could be larger than that and they were empires. However, when the Jews celebrated their high festivals and all the pilgrims came – not just from Judea, not just from Galilee, but also from the Greek countries as well and speaking Greek, when the Jews came into that city such as at the Passover—they swelled the population of that city to something over two hundred thousand. It was quite a crowd. You could get lost in such a crowd. And all that activity centered on the temple. I don't just mean the building of the temple, I mean the entire temple mount. For every head of a family must bring a lamb or a sheep to the priest on the temple mount, that the priest might slaughter that lamb according to the laws. And so when we, with Jesus, would walk up to that platform, he could get –they could get, we could get—lost in that crowd. Milling people, thick, in the court of the Gentiles. Barbeque smells coming up from the altar of burnt offerings, it makes your mouth want to water. And in the court of the Gentiles itself, here are the sellers, not with just little birds in their cages but with cattle, oxen – big oxen – they're selling for money, and sheep. Of course the people need these things for the sacrifice that must take place; and also the doves, that is to say, the pigeons which were sold for two farthings to the poor. Into this scene, unnoticed, walks Jesus. And then things begin to happen. First of all in the secret of Christ's mind, begins to grow an antipathy, an anger, a righteous anger with regard to what is going on in the house of God. And so Jesus takes those cords, which might have led the animals in, and braids those cords so they make a snapping whip. And Jesus takes that whip and begins to whip the animals – to whip the sheep and the oxen—and besides that to whip the sellers as well. Now he's noticed. Now there's all kinds of attention coming into Jesus's direction and he still doesn't stop. He drives them out of the temple. Let me tell you it must have been an odd sight. There are no smooth roads from the temple. They go clattering down stairs. Can you imagine an oxen rolling over and over on his way down? Of course, this gets their attention. And then, we don't know why it was, he doesn't whip the sellers of the pigeons. He speaks to them harshly, but maybe it is because they sell to the poor. He says unto them, "Get these things out of here. Stop making my father's house a house of commerce." He can play a pun even when he is angry. And so they go. That's the story. You have seen it.

Now in John comes the reflection on that story in which we can begin to understand the pattern of Jesus Christ, how he went about his business in the world, particularly at this point. Here come the steps. First of all, John refers to the disciples who may have remembered at this moment, or perhaps remembered after Jesus's resurrection, this quote from psalm 69, verse 10. "Zeal for your

house, zeal for your house will consume me.” In that text, we can begin to understand something of who Jesus was in this moment of response. Please. I said this will be a teaching and I am going to break that down into three parts so that we might distinguish Jesus from what else was going on, and thereby find how we might distinguish ourselves from and in what else is going on.

Zeal. Jesus was a zealot, but Jesus was a peculiar kind of zealot. Here is the distinction. In the days of Jesus and thereafter in the days of the disciples, all the way up to the time and short of the time 40 years after Jesus's crucifixion when the temple was destroyed, there were zealots in the country. Listen to me. These zealots were more concerned with those outside the gate, who were outside the culture, who were outside the nation, than they were concerned about those who were inside. These were the zealots who hated the most profound terrorists of this time. Rome. And they had to suffer the terrorisms of Rome through people like Pontius Pilate, yes, even in their own country. It infuriated them. For Pontius Pilate was capable of killing 46 people in a shot, unjustly, to raise all kinds of fears; and as time went on thereafter, even those who would support the Jews were found on crosses. So these zealots were not only concerned with those who were outside the gate and willing to fight them but they also took violent actions themselves. These zealots were called by the Romans “the Sicarii” which comes from the Latin word for a particular kind of knife – a long, extremely sharp knife. These zealots would walk through the city of Jerusalem in their long robes and when they came upon somebody who was treating with that terrorist nation, they would walk by, pull their knife, slit the gut of that bad person and continue walking, while that poor person would catch his guts and try to hold them in. When that one fell on the ground and died, the zealot who had done it was far, far away.

This is not Jesus's zealotry. Christ distinguishes himself for various reasons. His zealotry does not go against those who are outside the gate. He is zealous about those who are inside the gate. He is zealous about those who are within the country itself and his zealousness is that they should be pure: that nothing should stand between them—no obstacles should stand between them and the covenanting God. Jesus's zealousness is for the purity of the worshiping people that are at the temple, ay, for all the worshiping people of his country. Jesus's zealotry is for those who are the leaders, and so he speaks to the Jews who come to him hereafter. And in other accounts of this story these are the chief priests, these are the leaders. He is concerned for the purity of the leaders. Jesus's zealotry is concern for the purity of all those who would call upon the name of God.

And what is this purity? It is that nothing should stand between their humility, their sweetly humble obedience to God. Nothing. Not the selling of animals, not the aggrandizing of themselves by making more money, not the use of the hearts of the people to make more and more power for themselves, not the building up of themselves, but rather purity: that they would stand in cheerful humility before God, emptying themselves of themselves that God alone might fill them up with who they are. That's the pattern. There you have it. That's the pattern. That was the object of the zealotry of Jesus Christ. And what are the consequences? Well, Jesus is prepared. I'll say quickly here that these are the things that we might be prepared for too. The consequence is that this zealotry will consume me. It comes from Psalm 69. Would you open up to that Psalm with me? I want to show you what this verse comes from. The Gospel of John never ignores the contexts of these things. So that we can understand this verse even better by looking at the psalm itself, I'm going to come back to verse 9. But look at verse 10, and there is our quote: "Zeal for your house"—Oh, this is in the past perfect – "Has eaten me up." John makes a distinction, a very important one. Here it says: "will eat me up." Will consume me. So we're talking of the future. But where is that consummation? What does it mean to be eaten up?. Now, to verse 9, please. The one, the Jesus who has that kind of zeal within the kingdom, and whose zeal sort of interrupts the smooth operation of such things as the selling of the beasts in the temple; whose zeal interrupts the smooth operations of congregations, in churches, and the whole systems of denominations has this consequence: he has—I have become a stranger to my own kindred. This is how you get "et up." Those whose affection you wish and whose approval you desire, don't love you as much. And your own siblings turn away from you as though you are an alien, an alien to your mother's children, but look what follows. "Zeal for your house has eaten me up. The scorn for those who scorn you, O God, has fallen upon me." All right. There it is. If this is the pattern, the scorn of those who would scorn the ways of Jesus Christ shall fall upon us. But in Jesus's case, when that scorn falls upon him, it isn't just that it is aimed at him falsely. He suffers it. He takes it into himself and suffers that scorn. Drop your eyes to verse 13. For this, Jesus is prepared. "That those who sit at the gate murmur against me." These—in the days of the psalms—these were those who lead the city. They were the city leaders, the organization sitting in the gate making decisions for that city. They, however, chose this particular one. The government of that city scorned Jesus, and what's worse, even the drunkards made songs about him. There is this pattern and it is not pretty. But it is not all.

Take the next step with me, please. After the disciples remember that phrase, then the Jews and the leaders come to him and they say, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Now you listen to the epistle lesson and you know what the question really is. The question unto Jesus is this. After he has knocked

cows out of the church, they come unto Jesus—these pastors, these leaders—and they say this. They say: “What gives you the right to screw up our place like this?” That is what that means. “What signs, by what authority, who gives you the right to do this?” I want you to please pay attention. This is what distinguishes Jesus. He doesn't blame the other. What he does not claim is his right to do this. He does not say, “I am going after evil people.” Although he could say—in his life, in his ministry he could say—“I am going after evil people to quench the evil.” But he doesn't say that. What he doesn't say is: “I am the only mighty one around who is able to do that.” Although Jesus Christ as you and I both know had legions of angels that he could call. He could, but he doesn't say that. He doesn't rest within his mightiness. Nor does he—which is often implied when you go after evil, nor does he—imply, “and I am really good. I am better than the bad.” No, Jesus distinguishes himself by an authority that is exactly the opposite. Listen to what he says: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” There is his authority to do what he is doing. Now, of course, right away the Jews are thinking he is talking about a place like this. It has taken 46 years and it's not done yet, Jesus. How can you build it up in three days? Now, that is partly what Jesus is saying. He is talking about the temples of the church, the manifest organizations. And he says unto these people: you are, in fact, destroying these things. But there would be no grace in that, you understand. There would be no redemption. There would just be blame. Go on. “But,” says John, and the disciples recall, “he was speaking of the temple of his body.”

The authority that Jesus has for crying purity upon the people comes in the future when he dies on their behalf and rises again. That's where his authority comes from. Jesus's authority to purify a people comes from this: that he loves them so much that he will die for them. That's his authority. And it is a profound distinction from other authorities of this world. I will not blame them. Those authorities, those that give us the rights are part and parcel of this world. Christ distinguishes himself by crying the opposite. “It is because I love you. It is because I love you. And because finally your purity shall come from this more dramatic act than my making a whip of cords. It will come when I allow the cords upon my back, when I allow the violence against myself.” And that, dear people, is authority incontrovertible. It transfigures rather than overpowers.

And if this is to foreshadow any war at all, it foreshadows the real war against evil in this world. For finally, Jesus Christ shall be the best we have to offer. The goodest thing around. Jesus Christ, by a remarkable reversal, shall be more powerful than evil—evil reflected in the devil and in sin and in death. Not evil *people* but *evilness*, for the sake of the people. And then the shock and the awe

of that war shall be that Jesus does such a stunning stratagem that evil is made silent and mute and impotent forever. Jesus doesn't come riding upon the horses of the anticipated messiah. Jesus grants his body and his life to evil and lets them do their worst. He lets them do their best. He lets them wear themselves out on him and indeed he dies. And this is the paradox: that in death Jesus shall rise to life. That in his sacrifice shall be victory. When evil does its worst, Jesus right in the middle of its victory, defeats. For when it is exhausted, he rises. He rises. He rises again .

And what of us now? Here in this place, the church, this space? Well, we are called to distinguish ourselves. That doesn't mean the "blame game." It doesn't mean that at all. It doesn't mean our hatreds or our judgments. It means that we become zealots as our Lord Jesus was a zealot. That we become zealots for the purity of our people—certainly within this church, certainly within the confession that shall follow this sermon—that you be zealots for your own purity. It means that we become zealots for the purity of those who call upon the name of the Lord and for those who would lead the people of the Lord—that they likewise be pure. Dear people, when Jesus said that he loved the world so much that he would die for it, that includes us. That is where our profound humility comes: that we do not do what we do in self-righteousness and arrogance, but we do what we do in the sweet benevolent humility before God, calling people to account of their purity. And we should be prepared as Jesus was prepared. There are not people who are going to give us medals for this, not generally. There will be people in our own families who will misunderstand what we are doing and think that somehow we are blaming the nation. They will misunderstand and will therefore turn their backs on us. They won't talk to us. We will have become to them an insult. But if we do it as Jesus Christ does it, then where shall come our righteousness and where shall come our power? Friends, it comes from this: that we love them. That by the love of Jesus Christ, which by his death and resurrection he placed in us—by that love wherewith he has empowered us—that we love them. Only them. Them, the people of our nation, and our kith and our kin, and those dear people who have committed themselves to going and our leaders. That we love them, and that we love finally as Christ loves the whole world. The whole world.

Why don't I tell you that when we do that act upon the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ we become a conundrum. For if it is from love, no matter how they shoot their lip out at you, you can be happy. I mean that this is really a providential word. You get blamed and you get happy. You get blamed and more than that, you get kinder. You get blamed and you get better. Finally, we end laughing. Listen to Paul, who turns all these things around in reversal. Just as it is not anger and hatred but love that motivates us, so says Paul in second

Corinthians chapter six: This is how we come. We come “in honor and we come in dishonor. In ill repute, yes, but in good repute. We are treated as imposters and yet we are true, we know that. We are treated as unknown, and yet we are well-known. As dying, but look, we are alive. As punished and yet not killed. We are treated as sorrowful and yet we are always rejoicing. We are treated as poor and yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.” So we go from this place not with a gloomy fear that knows no Jesus. We go from this place laughing—a fully joyful and pure laughter—even in times like this. A laughter we beg the people to join in. Ah, but before that let's sing a hymn that says all that I have said to you, but much better than I have said it.

The sermon concludes with the singing of “God of Grace and God of Glory”

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