

## Whipping Us Into Shape

(Exodus 20:1-17; I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22)

Did you really listen to today's gospel lesson? If so, it probably conjured up a very unusual image in your mind. For, we usually think of Jesus as being meek and mild, but in today's gospel passage, he looks more like Harrison Ford in "Raiders of The Lost Ark!" Jesus—making a whip of cords and then powerfully, energetically swinging that whip at people and animals, forcefully driving them all out of the temple! Jesus! Indeed--quite an image! And yet since today's story, unlike many of the gospel stories, is found in all four of the gospels, most scholars agree that it must have really happened.

All four gospel writers agree that the story occurred during the Passover. But which Passover? The synoptic gospel writers, the three that are most similar, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all put the story at the end of Jesus' three-year ministry. They lift up the incident as one of "the final straws" before the authorities decided Jesus was too dangerous to ignore and thus arrested him. But the other gospel writer, John, puts the story at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Did Jesus wield his whip both Passovers? Maybe he got the whip out every Passover! Maybe, for Jesus, driving the sacrificial animals and money changers out of the temple was a Passover tradition! Or...maybe the gospel writer John had his Passovers mixed up.

And yet, I think there's a more likely explanation. Whereas Mark wrote his gospel around AD 65, John wrote his gospel some 45 years later. 45 years. A long time. About as long as our new time capsule will be entombed! 45 years. The gospel writer John, you see, had the luxury of time that the gospel writer Mark did not have. Mark just wanted to get the words and the stories down, so they wouldn't be lost. But John had the time to think about, pray about, listen to others about the words Jesus spoke and the actions Jesus performed. So John is the gospel writer who speaks of Jesus as being the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Vine, the Lamb of God. John, in other words, had enough time to translate who Jesus was in symbolic, memorable imagery.

As C.K. Barrett pointed out, for the gospel writer John, the actual time sequence wouldn't have been as important as properly and accurately introducing Jesus. John saw the story of Jesus wielding the whip as a great

way to introduce Jesus to his audience. He saw the story as a perfect way to set the stage for all that was to follow.

Did you notice in John's account that the people want a sign of who Jesus is and where his authority comes from? Only here in John's gospel do the Jews demand a sign from Jesus to verify his authority for wielding the whip. This is John's subtle way of saying that the story of Jesus' wielding the whip is the sign of Jesus' credentials.

Throughout the ages and even today, some people have seen the story as a sign of Jesus' humanity, as well as a justification for their own anger and violence. "Look," they say, "even Jesus got angry and resorted to violence!" But, of course, this is not the message John wanted to convey at all. It just doesn't fit with the Jesus we find in the other gospels or even in the rest of the Gospel According to John.

One key to understanding John's meaning can be found in the fact that the story happened during Passover. Passover was the holiday when the Jews remembered how God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt and led them to Mount Sinai, giving them the 10 Commandments, and then on into the Promised Land. Passover was suppose to be a celebration of God's love for his people, his presence with them, and his determination to bring them to a better way of living.

But when Jesus entered the temple, he didn't find people celebrating Passover by worshiping, praising and thanking God, interacting with God. Instead, Jesus found people who were treating Passover simply as a time when they had to go through the ritual of purchasing an animal to sacrifice. As Jesus wielded the whip, he shouted, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

The people should have come to God's house to spend time with God, especially on the grand holiday of Passover, but instead, they had come to conduct business.

But there's a second key John gives us so that we know we're on the right track in understanding the message of the story. And this second hint is that John tells us that Jesus' words—"Take these things out of here! Stop

making my Father's house a marketplace!"--made his disciples think of Psalm 69: "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." Jesus is the Son of God, who loves his Heavenly Father so much that he has come to stop the insulting way people have come to worship and relate to him. When Jesus entered the temple that day he found a faith had become not only stale but also insulting to God. It looked godly, but it had nothing to do with God. People were using God and taking advantage of others. They were so focused on rules and ritual that a new revelation of God didn't stand a chance.

Then John gives us a third key in understanding even more about Jesus. John gives us a little interaction between Jesus and the Jews. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." John tells us that understandably, the Jews can't believe Jesus is making this claim, since the temple has been under construction for 46 years and isn't even done yet. But John concludes the story though by commenting that after Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this and understood then that he'd been referring to the temple of his body being destroyed but then rebuilt or resurrected in three days. The early church understood that John was saying that he was the new temple—that worship of God, connecting with God, was to be through him, since he was the only sacrifice to make connecting with God possible.

What an injustice we do to today's story when we take from it only that image of Jesus being like Harrison Ford, wildly, angrily, violently snapping a whip at animals and people. How much more accurate it is for us to begin to think of the image as the Son sent by God to "whip us into shape." For, if we look up the expression "to whip into shape," we find that it means not to terrorize or to do harm but rather "to cause someone or something to be in a better condition." We use the expression in many ways: *The coach was not able to whip the players into shape before the game; I think I can whip this proposal into shape quickly; Hey, whip yourself into shape--you look a mess.*

Today's gospel story is a sign that Jesus is the one who brings in a new order, a new way of relating to God. As Jesus cracks his whip, the message is, "Out with the old! In with the new!" And the new is not just a reforming of the old religion but rather the establishment of a new relationship with

God, one that is not dependent on corruptible human effort but centers instead upon acceptance of Jesus as the perfect link between us and God. Wielding his whip on Passover, Jesus is a visible sign that Jesus has come to deliver us from slavery to a dead religion so that we may experience better life--renewed life--with God through him. Out of his love for us, out of his desire that we have not a dead religion but rather a close, personal, nurturing, empowering relationship with God himself, Jesus has come to "whip us and our religion into shape."

And so we come to the question we must always ask ourselves when we read scripture: So what? So what does today's passage have to say to us today?

First, it means that we must look at our Sunday morning behavior and ask ourselves how Jesus finds us here this morning. Granted, he doesn't find us buying and selling animals to sacrifice. But does he find us here only following the rules and going through the motions? Annie Dillard once commented that "people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute": getting out of bed; getting dressed; coming to church; opening the hymnal; mouthing some songs; occasionally tuning into the sermon; shaking hands with those around us; drinking some juice; saying a quick hello to God; standing for the benediction; leaving with the satisfaction of thinking we've done what we were suppose to do.

In the comic strip *Doonesbury*, a yuppie-looking dad approaches his son. The dad says, "Alex, honey, Mom and I have been talking, and we've decided it's time for us to start attending church as a family." The child says, "Church. Church is boring." "We thought you might say that. All kids think that." "Didn't you think church was boring when you were a kid?" "Sure I hated going, but church was good for me, so my parents made me stick it out. You (will) end up hating church, too, but you have to put in the pew time, like Mom and I did." But, for Jesus, obviously it's not enough that we're here. We must be here with the right hearts, for the right purpose—the purpose of drawing near to the holy God. If we're here just to put in pew time and if we listen closely, we'll probably hear the crack of Jesus' whip.

Second, today's gospel story cautions us that we must never allow buildings, symbols, signs, organizations, traditions, customs, or liturgies to become substitutes for our real devotion to our Lord himself. A small church in New

Jersey comes to mind. This congregation had a custom, a tradition, a ritual of covering or shrouding the Communion Table with a white table cloth. Then, as they sang the hymn before Communion, two church leaders would always lift the shroud from the table. Then they would fold it lengthwise, and lengthwise again, finally folding it in small triangles, as is done with the American flag. A woman named Betty was always one of the two who folded the shroud. In fact, by Betty's own admission, she was the guardian of the tradition. One day someone who didn't know this ritual was presiding over Communion. So, before Betty and another old-timer could come forward, he lifted each corner of the shroud, pulled it off the table, wadded it up in a ball, and tossed it on the pew behind him. From her pew, Betty dropped her hymnal and shouted, "No! Don't you dare do that!" She got up, retrieved the shroud, put it back on the table, straightened the corners, and then motioned for another old-timer to come help her. Then two of them folded the shroud lengthwise, then lengthwise again, then in little triangles like the American flag.

After the worship service someone asked Betty, "Why do we cover the Communion Table with that old white cloth anyway?" Betty said, "We've always done it that way before." The person said, "But why do we use it? Does it keep the bread cubes from going stale?" Betty said, "Don't ask questions. We have always done it that way before." The person said, "But don't you think all that fussing with the shroud on the table takes our attention away from the Lord's Supper and from the Lord himself?" Betty was like the Jews in John's story, saying, "Don't mess with our temple; it's taken forty-six years to establish these things." But the person questioning Betty must have heard the crack of Jesus' whip, calling her away from worshipping a ritual to the worship of God himself.

As Preacher Brett Younger pointed out, "Worship...(is) about God. We gather before Holiness... Worship is God's people kneeling, listening, praying, hoping, celebrating, giving, and adoring God. We are here to center ourselves in the mystery beyond our comprehension. In worship, we bow before God because we need to give ourselves to the one who is infinitely great. In worship, God intrudes upon our complacency, overturning tables, setting wild birds loose, clanging coins on the floor. In worship, God's presence is the sting of a whip driving us out of our smugness. In worship, God remakes us

into God's people."<sup>1</sup> In worship, God prepares us to go into the world the rest of the week, helping him challenge the false idols and devaluing values of society and helping him make life better for others. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; March 15, 2009

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<sup>1</sup>Younger, Brett