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“WHEN ONLY THE TRUTH WILL DO”

John 2.13-22

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So who was that angry fellow ejecting bankers, livestock traders, and other busy merchants from the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple? And when they didn't stir fast enough, he fashioned a whip from cords and began swinging. Was that our Jesus, meek and mild? Who was that guy toppling tables and upsetting cash registers, shouting all the while, "Don't confuse my Father's house with factory outlets." Lowly Jesus, our friend and comforter? Gentle Jesus, our good shepherd?

Such images jar sensitive places within us where we've long believed in Jesus. His strong words and deeds can strike us as unchristian, even as a little scary. Then again if we ever mistook the project of Christian faith as merely making nice people nicer, maybe our world needed a serious rocking anyway. Kind, certainly. Compassionate, yes, of course. But this story dispenses with milquetoast "nice."

This isn't the only story where the gospels remind us that following Jesus transcends mere pleasantries. Remember his mission is to restore our fragmented, broken human race from cringe-worthy to glorious, from debased to splendid. Jesus goes after nothing less than our rising up into something worthy of our destiny as beloved children of God. And Jesus is willing to break some eggs for this omelet. The story is upsetting, yes, but we learn a lot here. Jesus was compassionate but not sentimental, a word whose hidden destructiveness we explored last Sunday.

What are the lessons here? Anger as righteous indignation is not always evil or unchristian. Frankly, just look around at the world today. If some things no longer anger us—see the faces of the Stoneman Douglas high school students now—maybe we've made some serious compromises that are long overdue for review.

"Be angry, but do not sin," reads Ephesians (4.26), and "do not let the sun go down on your anger." Yes I know, people use their anger as an excuse for beating up other people and other forms of abuse. Some people are chronically angry and embittered. Anger is not the best first choice to deal with people and issues. But I for one celebrate that not all of us have lost the capacity for moral outrage.

Remember how it felt as you had something that badly needed to be said that no one else was willing to say and you had to stuff it for the sake of decorum. Author Flannery O'Connor said that it is good enough to speak in a normal voice under regular circumstances, as people listen and hear. But as others grow deaf to messages, there is no choice but to shout. We can shout with words or actions. Jesus came to announce God's coming reign. And his actions make clear that to make the sacred into something sordid is an offense, even an assault, upon God.

That is the first dimension of our gospel that I want to tease out of the story. But there is another, and maybe it is even more important. *Sometimes love is direct.* Sometimes probing truth must be spoken straightaway without any confusion or

doubt. Sometimes we must speak the truth in love because, frankly, we humans can't stand much truth, and we all need to hear more than we think we can stand. Consider this. If telling the truth sometimes seems very costly, we might weigh that against the slow choking death of quietly accepting lies, and calling it living.

Interesting, isn't it, how Christ's love isn't always soft, agreeable or affirming. Interesting how the same love embracing our hurt also boldly confronts our pride. Interesting how love's holy mystery defines itself in surprising or unnerving ways.

As for me, I can easily remember times when others needed to speak hard truth that I needed to hear. Starting with younger childhood, "Dale, you are standing at home plate like a wooden Indian," observed my coach who doubled as my father. "Dale, your exam showed familiarity with the material, but you must dig deeper if you truly want to excel," observed my professor of New Testament Interpretation. "Dale, looking at your numbers, all I can say is, you've been eating well recently," said Dr. Day. Or, "Dale, what is it with your need always to get in the last word." I am not going to tell you who said that. But I fully realize how this sermon sets me up for some singed eyebrows this morning as I shake your hands at the door.

The point is none of the comments felt good at the time. I felt stung, maybe even betrayed. But when it comes to love, it is sentimentality that insists always on soft and affable feeling, and forbids the temporary wound that leads to higher healing. Discipleship is about our transformation into the persons God means for us to become. But how does that transformation occur if we must always go tippy-toe?

Jesus' holy love in the temple is for times when nothing less than the truth will do. It might not feel much like the sentimentalized love that circulates and holds sway in pop culture. Back in the 80s we found the stomach to talk about toughlove, didn't we? That approximates what Jesus reveals today about temple-cleansing love. Just like children, sometimes we grownups need a good talking-to as well.

I am bold enough to suggest I am not alone in needing this. Just think of how we dizzy ourselves in self-deception and run around in circles. We all have our moments when the reverie of our status quo begs for nothing so much as disturbing. To such as these—to such as ourselves—someone must periodically say, "How long do you plan to go down that road? And just where to you imagine it leads?"

One of the best tests of Christian community is whether such things can happen here; whether we can speak the truth in love without beating each other up; whether we are willing to hear it; whether we trust each other to make room for it; or whether everything must always remain terminally polite, genteel, and superficial.

To become such a deep, transformative community, three conditions are a must. Bill Hybels writes for holy, purifying love to thrive we must be understand that *telling the truth matters even more than always keeping the peace*. The prophet

Jeremiah complained about the false, “Peace, peace, where there is no peace.”

His point is the cost of peace is too high if it demands our authenticity, our integrity, and our honesty. Again from Eph. (4.25), “So then, putting away falsehood, let us all speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.”

The second condition to nurture a Christian truth-telling environment is realizing the *well-being of others matters more than maintaining our current comfort level*. At this point I defer to the five AA groups meeting here who talk about “rigorous honesty.” They know that others might well have died if no one was willing to interrupt the delusions of their behavior and speak the truth without mincing words.

The third condition is revealing. I’ve known many in the church proud to declare they are direct by nature. And they’re unafraid to say out loud what must be said. Damn the torpedoes. But when time comes for them to hear about themselves as directly as they speak to others, they’re suddenly thin-skinned, acting like victims. Bullies always eventually posture as victims. And this way can’t cover for bullies.

I close with this story. Psychiatrist Robert Coles tells of a high school student in chemistry class. He watched another student unpack a chemical compound that he was supposed to prepare in class. He realized his peer was cheating. Just then, another student’s elaborate set-up of flasks and tubes broke and collapsed. Most all of the class laughed heartily at this. No one lifted a hand to help her. The girl whose experiment was ruined put her head on the table, and sobbed gently.

At this point, the student Coles knew moved across the room to help her. The other students kept laughing, mocked him, then returned to their own work. That was when the young man lost his cool. He slammed his chemistry book on the table, and started in with a Jimmy Stewart-like oration. First, he berated himself for letting himself become so driven, so competitive, so caught up within himself, so slow to help others. He then asked the other students point blank what they thought their stupid dog-eat-dog chemistry lab was worth in the larger scheme of things. Finally, he asked the teacher, just returning to the room, what he believed was happening in his classroom. Having hushed them to silence with his temple-cleansing speech, Coles’ student fell silent. Taking him aside, the teacher chastised this vocal student for “lording his values over others and for judging them.”

That story is our gospel lesson in miniature. Love has room for truth. Cowardice always asks: is it safe? Vanity always asks: is it popular? But conscience asks: is it right? And God asks: is it both fully loving and truthful? God’s grace isn’t cheap, but costly. Christ’s love is both the tenderest and the toughest we will ever know. Amen.