

“Creative Disruption”

March 3, 2024

Scripture: I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Years ago, my first year as a seminary student, so many years ago, I attended a class that was a sort of survey of all the disciplines taught. In each class we would hear from two or three professors in different disciplines. One week we started by hearing from Dr. Carl Dudley, who was a sociologist and minister, specializing in congregational ministry. In fact, I think his first call as a pastor was as the assistant minister at First Presbyterian, Buffalo. Carl told us a story about another church where he served. One Monday morning a woman from the church came to his office to tell him how disappointed she had been the day before when she went into the sanctuary only to find a new family sitting in “her” pew. It really upset her and she couldn’t shake it.

The two of them went into the sanctuary and sat in her pew. She told him about how she and her husband had sat in that pew all their years as members of the congregation. Their children had sat with them and then their grandchildren. Now, as a widow, she could sit there every Sunday morning and be surrounded by those wonderful memories. It made her feel less alone; it made her feel loved. So, to walk in and see someone else sitting there, she felt as though she had been discarded, replaced. It hurt to see another family occupying a space she had come to consider home.

They talked about those feelings for a while and Carl helped her come up with a way she could welcome others and honor her past. The next Sunday, she watched for that new family. She introduced herself to them and invited them to join her in her pew, sharing her space with them as a gesture of hospitality and acceptance.

Well, you can imagine we students were absolutely enthralled by this story. What a beautiful example of pastoral care and compassion!

After Carl was finished we heard from a professor from a completely different discipline. Larry Welborn taught us Greek. He was young and energetic and passionate. He explained biblical critical method to us and how the New Testament was written. His favorite portion was the Gospels. Larry loved to talk about Jesus and his ministry and how it’s portrayed by each gospel writer. One thing the gospels all have in common, regardless of the community where they originate, is Jesus is always portrayed as someone who wants to shake up and disrupt the established authority. He said and did things to challenge the status quo and set his society on its ear. At the end of his lecture, Larry looked out at Carl and said, “Carl, Jesus wouldn’t have sat in that pew; Jesus would have knocked that pew over!”

Our eyes were as big as saucers after that. What a contrast! But he wasn’t trying to be dismissive of pastoral ministry. He wanted to disrupt our thinking and challenge our image of who this person we worship really is. Many of us carry an image of Jesus that is gentle and loving. And there are times in the gospels when he’s portrayed that way. In Matthew’s gospel, for instance, he tells the crowd, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy

burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.” That’s the image of Jesus the woman in the congregation needed to discover. But we’re mistaken if we think that’s the limit of his personality.

Our reading today offers a very different picture of Jesus, one that might make us a little uncomfortable. This scene where Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers and animal vendors in the temple court is found in all four gospels. That’s unusual. There aren’t many events in Jesus’ life that even John’s gospel portrays. But here it’s placed very differently than in the other three. In the other gospels this occurs at the very end of Jesus’ ministry, right after his entrance into Jerusalem for the last time, during the final week of his life. Here, though, it becomes a sort of inaugural act. It’s his first public action and it’s intense.

Some scholars think this would have resulted in Jesus’ arrest right then and there. But it seems like this was more symbolic than it was rebellious. It might have been very contained and hardly even noticed by most of the people gathered, just a little skirmish off in a corner. Jesus uses this to let his followers know that he is there to challenge a system he believes has become corrupt and unjust. This is not the beginning of some violent overthrow of the authorities. It’s a demonstration of his intention to be a prophet and speak out for change.

There are some folks who use this passage as a way to justify their own political violence. But we can’t see what Jesus is doing in isolation from his whole ministry. There is nothing in Jesus’ life that can justify storming a capitol building, for instance, or attacking a synagogue or mosque. The other day I listened to a report from the Public Religion Research Institute about a recent survey on White Christian Nationalism. Among adherents and sympathizers to that ideology from across the country, nearly 40% agree with the statement, “Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.” That compares to 19% across the whole population and only 7% of people who reject white Christian nationalism. Reading this story about Jesus in the temple as permission for violence should be rejected by anyone who takes Jesus’ ministry seriously.

I offer instead that we see this action as a form of creative disruption. His purpose is to shake his followers out of complacency, to alert them that his ministry will question all their assumptions about God and about their role in revealing God’s kingdom. By placing this event at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the writer of this gospel wants to signal that their world is about to be turned upside down, that God will disrupt everything.

That’s what Paul is trying to tell the Christians in Corinth. In the minds of that society a crucified Jesus is a defeated Jesus. His death means the powers that be win. But Paul tells them the violence of the authorities does not make them strong. In Christ crucified God takes the side of the oppressed and the suffering. As theologian James Cone says in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, “The cross is the most empowering symbol of God’s loving solidarity with the ‘least of these,’ the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices.” By penetrating the veil of piety and ritual, whether with sacrifices or hollow prayers, that only obscure God,

God enters our experience through Christ crucified and disrupts our complacency, shakes us out of our stupor and reveals true strength and wisdom.

True strength lies in a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of those who are weaker, who are vulnerable; to stand with them and make their pain our own. True wisdom lies in the knowledge that change comes through persuasion and not coercion. If we want to build a society that is just and accepting, then we're called to live in solidarity with those who are hurting and see them clearly. That's what God does for us in Christ. Through the creative disruption of Christ crucified, the weakness of systems that keep people oppressed is revealed.

I find it frustrating to see how resilient oppressive systems can be. Even when it's obvious that our immigration system, for instance, isn't working and everyone agrees it needs to change, somehow we just cannot find a way to cut through the differences and reach an agreement that will be beneficial to those seeking to come into the country and the communities receiving them. There are a couple of million people in our country right now who have lived here nearly all their lives, earned degrees, joined the military, yet are still not given any pathway to citizenship. What sort of creative disruption can be done to shake that system loose? How can we be better advocates for a just immigration system that honors the needs of those seeking asylum while also providing the resources needed to accommodate them?

Or we can look at our current system of social welfare. How can we provide access to folks in need who struggle with food insecurity and hunger without shaming them or punishing them for being poor? The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, whose motto is "We're a Resurrection, not an insurrection" and who point out that poverty is the 4th leading cause of death in our country, is sponsoring marches in state capitals across the country asking just that question and challenging lawmakers to live up to their responsibilities to care for the most vulnerable among us. When people march en masse to the seats of authority and call for action, it can be disruptive. Blocking roads and occupying spaces of privilege can send a powerful message that change is needed. It can shake people in positions of authority out of their complacency and remind them whose lives are affected by the decisions they make.

The creative disruption Jesus models in the temple isn't done for the sake of violent overthrow or to coerce certain behaviors. It's done as a way of calling attention to the needs of the most vulnerable. We are called to live for those who suffer; we're called to stand with them in their pain, to be the presence of Christ crucified in the world. It's never comfortable to do that and it's never easy. But we have Jesus' example to guide us. His strength is revealed through what the world calls weakness, and so can ours. When we allow Christ to disrupt our lives and lead us to stand alongside those who suffer, we will discover the power and wisdom of God that saves us from complacency and frees us to live for the life of the world.

Amen