

# **“Love and Justice”**

**Exodus 20:1-17, I Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22**

**Part IV of X in the Sermon Series  
“The Journey Back to Love”**

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 7, 2021, dedicated to the memories of Nancy Truax, mother of Jim Truax and my friend, Tom Murrell, to Annette and Richard Murch for 27 years of loving marriage, to the memory of John Lewis and all who crossed the bridge in Selma, Alabama on “Blood Sunday,” 56 years ago this morning, to the 524,000+ Americans who have died from COVID-19 since March 2020 and always to the glory of God!

## “Love and Justice”

Exodus 20:1-17, I Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jesus is not only a healer of individuals; he is also a prophet to the nations. While he walked the earth, Jesus delivered people from paralysis, mental illness, leprosy, open seeping wounds, deformities, blindness and the inability to speak – or muteness. But, again and again, in word and in deed he returned to the plight of the poor, whose poverty, in true prophetic fashion, he knew was no historical accident, but the fruit of social injustice.

In John's gospel today, Jesus walks into the temple of Jerusalem and is confronted with social injustice inflicted by the religious elites and their money-making minions who are busy extracting the last ounce of blood money from the poor people of Judaism. In the game of sacrificing animals to cleanse people's sins, vendors are making money selling cattle, sheep and doves to be turned into burnt offerings to God. Money changers – like the payday lenders of our time – are ripping off the poor by charging exorbitant rates as the poor get poorer to purchase the sacrificial animals.

The rich will buy the cattle, the middle class the sheep, and the poor – if they go deep enough in debt - will buy doves in the economy of sacrifice – which packs the passageways in the temple's Holy of Holies. Jesus' stomach is turning as vendors, money changers, and crowds of customers are doing the business of sacrifice everywhere around him as Passover is beginning to come to Jerusalem to be celebrated while the odor of gouging the poor fills his nostrils and all of the air along with the rising smoke of burnt animal flesh.

Jesus has smelled enough. He has seen enough. He sits down. He focuses his anger. He weaves a whip of chords. Then he stands up and uses his whip to drive the cattle and the sheep, the vendors and the money changers out of the temple. Tables are crashing. Coins are flying. Doves are flying around the temple grounds. And speaking of the doves, Jesus yells, *“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!”*

This is not easy listening Jesus. This is not healing hands Jesus. This is not preaching peace Jesus. This is righteous anger Jesus. This table turning Jesus. This is powerful and purposeful Jesus.

This is Just Jesus.

This **Just Jesus** has just sealed his own fate. You see, you don't mess with the economy of the religious elite and simply walk away. You become the sacrificial lamb of God. You pay with your life. So we are witnessing THE lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world – setting up his own sacrifice for the life of the world. He is preparing – if you will – to lay down his life to save the sacrificial animals in Jerusalem's temple.

At this point, there is a major shift in the tone, the pace, even the purpose of the passage in John's gospel. Everything changes in a single moment. The noise of the busy temple, the raucous righteous anger of Jesus all become still. All of the sudden, the Gospel writer, John, takes over. He shifts his style, his language and his tone to focus on what he believes this all means.

Quite frankly, the church has spent 2000 years calming good church people by piling up interpretations of the text that follows. We want the whipping, waving Jesus to simply go away. He is not good for our publicity! John helps us do that.

First, we hear from the disciples who try to make sense of Just Jesus by turning to an ancient text from Psalm 69:9 to reveal that there is zeal in Jesus in this temple scene.

Then the Jewish leaders try to make sense of the incident by questioning Jesus' actions and his radical closing words, which will later be used to charge him with crimes punishable by death on the cross. *“Destroy this temple,”* he says, *“and in three days I will raise it up”* (v. 19).

Then as the crowd responds in understandable confusion —

almost with absence of meaning, John steps into the scene. Remember, John is the “Beloved Disciple,” so called by himself. More fully present than he has been up to this point, John offers the final interpretation in the text. From his unique interpretive posture, he looks backward from the crucifixion and the resurrection that have yet to come, he offers a strange new interpretation in strangely matter-of-fact terms: *“But he was speaking of the temple of his body.”*

To me, this feels like a scene from a movie where everything freezes. You know what I mean. You see feathers flying, money flying, cattle stampeding, sheep running every direction, vendors chasing their animals and money changers trying to pick-up all the coins they can. All is frozen. Even Jesus is frozen with a whip raised over his head about to strike again. Everything is frozen – but looks like pandemonium in this frozen scene.

Only John, the beloved disciple is moving and speaking. It all feels so weird. It feels to me like John doesn’t know what to do with Jesus’ righteous anger. He acknowledges what happened. But, to give it “real meaning,” he wants to spiritualize it. Much has been and should be said about this interpretive moment, about the shift from the temple to Christ’s body, about the surety that distinguishes John’s words from the interpretations that precede this.

The radical thrower of tables, the whipper of all that is wrong, the righteous and angry “Word Made Flesh” dwelling among us “full of grace and truth” becomes - before our eyes - the sacrificial lamb of God. Maybe we need to spend some more time listening to other people interpret this passage. Maybe our interpreters need to

stretch from disciples, Jewish leaders in the temple fray and John spiritualized interpretation to our sisters and brothers who – like the poor and forsaken of Jesus’ time – have a few things to teach us about righteous anger and justice.

Let’s not just spiritualize this story. Instead, let us contextualize this story. Let’s make it our own. Let’s freeze our frame our own story – left in the rubble of temple led by our Raucous and Righteous Savior and allow our sisters and brothers time to speak in our context – to speak to us about what righteous anger facing social injustice looks like.

So John, if you are listening, we want to move you out of the freeze frame and move the “Black woman warrior poet” Audre Lorde in place of you. Audre shares her context and connects with Jesus’ anger in the temple. 40 years ago, in a lecture about Women responding to Racism, Audre Lorde said,

*“My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, so face it and use it fearlessly.”* from *“The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,”* a 1981 lecture by Audre Lorde.

Now, let’s move Audra out of the freeze frame and bring in Brittany Cooper to speak out of the Freeze Frame, too. In 2018 in her powerful book, *“Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower,”* Brittany Cooper wrote: *“Black women have the right to be mad as hell. We have been dreaming of freedom and carving out spaces for liberation since we arrived on these shores. There is no other group, save Indigenous women, that knows and understands more fully the soul of the*

*American body politic than Black women, whose reproductive and social labor have made the world what it is today.” WOW!*

One more time, insert Cole Arthur Riley of Cornell University into the freeze frame – delivering her reflection on our table-flipping Savior last summer during the heat of the protests following the murder of George Floyd: *“We fear that to allow for anger is to become less like you. Let us meet the God of the prophets. For you tell the truth. You hold fury at injustice. You, in embodied anger, flipped the temple tables. Would you help us to become faithful discerners of when to calm and when to rouse? Rejecting that anger which leads to bitterness or hatred of another, yet tapping into a righteous rage when that which you’ve created is under abuse and neglect. The dignity of creation demands our emotions. Make ours a beautiful rage.”* Cole Arthur Riley, @blackliturgies, on July 29, 2020.

### **Make ours a beautiful rage.**

Listening to my African American sisters, I hear and feel the power of rage and righteousness coming together in this moment in Jerusalem’s temple – and this moment in our land. It is as though they were on Jesus’ shoulders as he was whipping his way through the temple and unleashing the spirit of God with Holy Passover power.

I believe Jesus could no longer abide in the separation of love and justice. In the spirit of justice, he was figuring out what belonged to whom and was seeking to return it to them. He was seeking to give back to the poor – their money, their dignity, their real faith and their love for God. In the spirit of love, he was defending and protecting those with whom he had been ministering and healing and teaching and preaching. He couldn’t watch them lose any more. He couldn’t bear to witness his Father’s House or his

beloved brothers and sisters being used and abused by thieves and charlatans who were operating in the safe shelter of an abusive religious leadership structure.

It was out of love and protection; from a heart of justice for all – that Jesus righteously raged in the temple that morning. Love and justice always need to stand side-by-side as people are empowered to make change in this world.

Enter one last picture in this freeze frame of the temple – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of love and justice inseparably bound together when he said: *“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”* Amen.

So here we are – the Raging, Righteous, whip-snapping Son of a Carpenter, Son of God, Savior of the World. I want to take one last look at him. I want us to look in his eyes. I want us to see the eyes of Jesus. Then, I want us to see what he saw that day. With the eyes of love and justice, I want us see – through the eyes of Jesus – what hurts and harms people. I want us to see – through the eyes of Jesus in the Temple that morning – why he was raging. Because he saw that poverty needed to come to end. He saw that abuse needs to stop. He sees today that racism and sexism and heterosexism and homophobia and misogyny and mistreatment of people is tearing us apart and it needs to end.

So, with the frame frozen, I want us to see his eyes. I want us to see his hands. I want us to be his hands – through his eyes and through the power in his hands, I want us to become table turners too.

**Let's really turn the tables.** Through the eyes and the hands of Jesus in this world – let us love the people who others call loveless and whom they treat terribly. Let us confront what is wrong and do what is right. Let us protect and serve those who are not protected and served by policing policies, procedures and behaviors that hurt and kill our Black and Brown sisters and brothers. Let us defend every American's basic right to food, decent housing, medical care and education.

While charity is always needed to alleviate the effects of injustice, let us – as table turners – work for justice which eliminates the causes of injustice. As we do the work of love and justice, we need to know, justice will make unpopular. It will make us uncomfortable because justice leads to confrontation while charity never really affects the status quo.

While we are grateful for food pantries, we need to create a world where no one goes hungry because folks have a just and livable wage. They have good jobs. They have housing. They don't need food pantries and free lunches at homeless shelters because they have a place to call home.

I pray this day that our righteous anger turns to action for justice. I pray this day, we come to Christ's table – to set it back up – so it's not turned over. Then, to sit at Christ's table of love and grace and see truly the eyes and hands of Jesus. And that we become his eyes and hands for love and justice – Now. Amen.