

“Challenging the Status Quo”

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Now I wanted this sermon to be interesting - to relate to now - so I thought about turning the pulpit and throwing it over, but I decided I didn't like to stand behind some narrow little lectern, so I don't want to hurt my baby [the pulpit]. Then I thought, I will go pitch the baptismal font. Well, that would break and everyone would start whining that their grandchildren baptized with this - so I have to leave it alone. Then I thought, I will just roll the piano off the edge [of the platform] – or pitch a few bell tables. But do you really want that look from Bob Railey and Deb Regennitter saying, “I'm really disappointed in your actions.” I decided I didn't want to go there. So, you are just going to have to listen to it [the sermon] and get from your own mind what Jesus was doing in his Temple.

He runs in and he knocks over the Temple tables. The money is flying. The birds are flying one way or the other. The cattle are in there. Why would he do it?

Well, at first I thought these people are doing something inappropriate in the Temple - but that isn't quite true. In the Temple, you have “Temple sacrifices.” So when all of these people were traveling - the pilgrims were coming from all over - especially right then because it was just before the Passover, and if you were traveling a long distance, you didn't want to be carting a cow; you didn't want to worry about carrying a caged bird; you had to worry enough about getting yourself through the desert, just to get to Jerusalem.

It was a heck of a lot easier to take your coins with you and buy the sacrificial animals right there in the Temple. Then you go in, have it all done, and no fuss, no muss. Easy for them, money for the Temple. It was a no-brainer. But Jesus didn't like the idea.

They were not doing anything wrong. They were making it easier to worship. It was easier to exchange their coins. The reason they were exchanging coins was a.) You had coins from all over the place and how would they know what value each one was; and b.) The coins from some places were pagan, and you didn't want pagan objects in the faithful Temple. Or, if most of them were Roman you had Caesars marked on them, and you couldn't let that kind [of coin] in the Temple. So it made sense to change the coinage.

What's the problem, Jesus? Jesus had a problem because what started out as probably a really good idea became too complicated, became too difficult and the act of doing these things became more important than *why* they were doing them. Focusing on the coins turned into, “Let's raise money for the Temple,” which became more important than the actual worship in that Temple.

Having all of the animals - with the smell and the expense and the clean-up and everything else - became so vitally important, that it became more important than the act of the sacrifice itself. Then throw in the fact that now Jesus was transforming and making simpler what was going to happen. No longer was there going to be a sacrifice - this is what he is telling us - that needs a Temple and animals. [Jesus said] “In time, if you watch my ministry and follow it, I will become that sacrifice. You will never need

another one. I'm the Temple. No longer will you need one built with stone. I'm the last blood that should be shed for your health and for your spiritual lives."

Then it began to make a little sense. I think one of the reasons why Jesus got so mad about it was that it had made the Temple a mockery - because it was so complicated and complex.

I'm thinking of that as I'm reading a couple of different books right now. One is called "Simple Church." (It was given to me by a friend to read and I got around to it about six months later.) In this really well-written book - that Session and others will be hearing about later - they talk about how churches have become so complicated and so complex that they are becoming a mess, and why a lot of churches are not growing.

They have made everything so complex - not unlike what it must have felt like in the Temples, with coins being turned around and with cattle in there. It's like The Commons after the first service when we try to sell everything including monster cookies. It wears you out.

What the book "Simple Church" says is that we need to simplify how we "do church," because there are so many programs, so many activities, that you forget why you are even doing them. We always - according to the book - need to make sure it's clear what our ministry and our vision is. In some way that vision - no matter what your mission is, or your vision statement, your inclusivity statement, or whatever statement you want to say, is - at the end of the day, it has to be, in some fashion, the Great Commandment: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and all your mind. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Upon those two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* Love God; love your neighbor - everything else is gravy.

The problem is we are so busy programming. We say, "Oh, our membership is a little low. Oh, the budget - we may not make it. We better pack more in to become more appealing." It gets so confusing, so complex, the authors of the "Simple Church" say "Chase those money changes out of the Temple. Get back to basics - to a few simple things that people will define you by. It will make it easier for new members and active members to be involved and to know what is next."

When you have to go to Facebook, Twitter and a website just to figure out the complexity of our calendar, this may be a little bit much. They say there are four things that we need to do, and I don't want to just talk about church; because mainly today (we will talk about church another time) I want to talk about you and me - about our lives - because our lives are as muddled, complex and difficult as any church or any temple 2000 years ago. There are a whole lot of money-changers we need to chase out of the temples of our hearts.

According to the book, there are four things that we need to do in order to make that happen: The first one is *clarity*. We have to know why we are on this earth, and what God has called us to be and do. Now when you were young it might have been easier, at least it was for me. From the time I was six years old I knew I wanted to be a minister. I would set up my stuffed animals, my GI Joe, and, by golly, they were all holy. It was the best

church I ever had. Nobody ever talked back. I got everything I wanted in a Session meeting. [Lots of laughter.] It was perfect.

But, then as you move on. I spent my entire life knowing how this was going to work. You know, I knew what my studies were going to be. I knew I could get a D- in math and science - because I never saw math or science taking place in church except for the budget, and there were always smart, intelligent, mathematical people that could do that, so I didn't need it.

I knew I needed to read. I knew I needed to learn history. I knew there were other things. I went through high school. I went to college and was a religion major. I figured maybe I would need to speak in front of people, so I became a speech, communication and theater arts major on top of that. I graduated and went to Seminary. It was really easy. You knew just what you were going to do - and for some of you - you had the same experience I did. You had the clarity about what you wanted to do when you grew up. I always feel bad for the kids and young adults who don't know what they want to do.

I always teased my daughter, Hannah. I said, "The only thing you are good at is reading out loud. But that is good because you can get a job where you read out loud."

The thing I can do is speak out loud, so I became a minister.

I feel bad for folks who are super-smart in every area. I knew a fellow who was smart at everything. He put things on YouTube. I can't use his name anymore, but he was brilliant. He never had a B in anything. He went through high school and into college. He couldn't find a major. When he was in his junior and senior year he still didn't have a major. Because he was so good at everything, he could never narrow it down. He couldn't clarify. Now, I know the guy is my age. I have kind of lost track of him, but I have to believe he is still wondering what he is going to do with his life and he hasn't figured it out yet. You probably know people like that. They are so good at everything that they just bounce around and are never great at anything.

The second thing they talk about in the book is *movement*. Jesus knew how to clarify. He knew that he was going to be that sacrificial lamb - at least in the Gospel of John. He didn't turn those Temples over because he was in a bad mood. He was defining who he was and what the Temple was supposed to be, and at least - in the Gospel of John - he knew he was going to be that Temple that would be sacrificed.

But the second word is *movement* and there was a movement in Jesus' ministry. In John, it starts off with the kicking over of that Temple and the cleansing of that Temple. Then he moves on to gather his Disciples and Apostles and starts teaching them. He [Jesus] starts preparing them to live after he dies.

There is a movement to it, just like the movement that I took from high school to college, seminary and to a church. To stay on that path, they said, the key is to make sure that you know where you are moving and that there is direction to it. In your life, where is that movement taking you? Are you controlling it, or is everyone else controlling you?

It is easy when you are in high school and college. You know you have to get prepared for the next step. It is a lot more difficult when you are getting ready to retire, and you are still being called to move in a direction, and it had better not be that La-Z-Boy. It [your life] needs to continue to move. It's actually hard to follow this four-step journey the older we get to still be relevant and meaningful, and figure out what God is calling us to do, at each stage of our lives. Follow that movement.

The third one is *alignment*. Alignment is arranging everything in your life, so that it fits the movement that is defined by its clarity. This is the hard one because, over and over again, there will be things in life that try to pull you away from the direction you are moving.

For Jesus it was those Sadducees and Pharisees - they were always trying to trip him up, always trying to get him to go *their* way. For example, again the Jewish people at that time were wonderful at complexity - at making something simple difficult. So, let's follow God. How difficult can it be to follow that one God? Well, the people of faith could make anything that simple hard. They could find the way to follow God by memorizing and following the intricacies of 613 laws - Levitical codes. Good Lord! All you have to do is appease God and listen to that God and move forward. But no, they had to create 613 laws to appease and follow this God. We took something simple and we human beings made it really, really difficult.

We do the same thing in our churches, with how many rules and obligations and programs you have to follow. We do it in our own lives, with everyone else pulling us, guiding us in directions we shouldn't or don't want to take. We often do it because we get so moved by money. I know why Jesus kicked those coins off the table. How many ministers don't make a move when they think God is leading them because, "We don't have enough of our mortgage paid off."?

How many people in work positions don't want to leave or make a change in their lives and go in a different direction in their work? They are burned out and fried by 45, but by the time they find out they really want to make that move, at 50, they can't, because they are too close to retirement. They don't want to start over. It's not financially beneficial to make this move, so they spend the rest of their work lives in positions that are dreary and unexciting.

We are making decisions for the wrong reasons, guided by the wrong responsibilities. How hard is it when you have a child in to college? You can't make a change. It's selfish. It's moving in one direction toward a goal and aligning ourselves to make that goal possible. You have all of these responsibilities. It is hard to realize, but each and every step of the way, it's the clarity that keeps us on track.

The final thing along that road is *focus*. Focus daily - weekly - on where we are going. Jesus did. He didn't get sidetracked by those things, even in the garden of Gethsemane where he wanted to give it up; he focused again and said, "No. That is what I'm told to do; to give myself to the cross because I believe in the resurrection God will also provide."

We are called in the same way to *focus* on what God is calling us to do in our lives. If we are stuck for one reason or another in our work life, it doesn't mean we have to be stuck in our personal or sharing life. There are things we can continue to do, but the focus means we always have to remember to ask ourselves, "Who does God want me to be and how do I fulfill that?"

I know a lot of people - we ask teachers all time to be Sunday School teachers because they are public school teachers, so they must be great at it - and every once in a while I will get a wonderful teacher who says, "I do that all week. Put me in something else."

I say, "There you go. There is your focus." You might enjoy your job teaching but that isn't the extent of who you are. There's more to you. You live even more in the expanded focus in the life of your church - the body of Christ. Keep thinking about who you are and clarify that so you can say it. Where you are going to move to make that reality, that clarity happen? Align yourselves so when all of those other things are pushing against you, you know how to respond and then focus on it daily.

Jesus did that. He started off in John with kicking those tables over, then every day thereafter he made sure he kicked them again and again in different ways, so that he could finish what God had prepared him to do.

I pray that for you and me that, at the end of our days, we can look back and say, "We focused. We did what you [God] called us to do. We didn't do it perfectly, but by God we did it to the best of our ability. Thank you that you gave us the ability to see it and continually move toward it, to align ourselves, and to never stop focusing on it; so that when I let go and take my last breath, I can say, 'thank you,' and you [God] can say, 'I'm ready for you, good and faithful servant.'"

Let's continue our work through Jesus. Amen