

11-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Mark W. (2006) "Not purity, but compassion," *Consensus*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol31/iss2/15>

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Not Purity, but Compassion

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Text: John 2:13-22

The account of Jesus cleansing the temple is not about bingo. Maybe that never occurred to you, but when I was growing up, this morning's Gospel reading often brought bingo to mind! Oh, it wasn't the game itself; it was the notion of playing bingo to raise money for the church. Looking back, it was actually more about Catholics than about bingo.

We Protestants had cultivated an anti-Catholic bias in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Parents worried that their sons or daughters might marry Roman Catholics. And when John Kennedy ran for president, some worried that the pope would soon be running the United States of America. We were suspicious of Roman Catholics because, well, they were different. They ate fish on Fridays and gave up things for Lent. Bingo was further proof that Catholics were up to no good because they played bingo in church and Lutherans didn't.

So, we were always waiting for Jesus to come and overturn the bingo tables, sending the cards flying all over the church basement and spilling the little numbers out of the cage that spun them around. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Jesus would shout as he tipped over the cash boxes. We were quite sure that Jesus didn't have any problems with our pork and sauerkraut suppers or the strawberry social which raised money for missions. But bingo, well, that's different!

But it's not about bingo. Jesus' disruption that day in the temple was a compelling sign of Jesus' disruption of the way things were. We usually think of this episode happening near the end of Jesus' life, after he had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey. After all, it's a crisis scene, a confrontation that gave the authorities the evidence they needed. This Jesus was troublemaker – probably part of the Zealot movement trying to overthrow the government.

Now it is true that this story does come near the end in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus' outburst in the temple was one of the last

straws that led to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. But in John's Gospel, the story comes in chapter 2. It is not near the end, but very near the beginning.

What's going on here? Did Jesus chase the moneychangers more than once? Was it a habit with him? "Watch out! Here comes that fellow from Nazareth again! Grab the cash box!" I think it's more likely that all four Gospel writers knew the same story, but John understood it in a particular light. This wasn't the only political catalyst leading to Jesus' arrest. For John, Jesus' actions in the temple pointed to the very heart of who Jesus was and what he had come to do. It had to come at the beginning of the story, not at the end.

When we take a closer look at this chapter in John's Gospel, it brings us deep into the heart of Jesus. There are two stories in this chapter connected by a little verse about Jesus and his family going to Capernaum. The first story is Jesus' miracle at the wedding in Cana. Do you remember? They ran out of wine at the wedding and Jesus told the steward to fill six stone jars with water. Then he told the steward to taste the water, and – *voilà!* – the water had turned to wine of such bouquet and flavour that the steward wondered why the host had saved the best for last!

That story is far more significant than merely prompting us to wish that Jesus would come to our parties! John tells us a particular detail that we sometimes miss in our fascination with all that wine: the stone jars were used for the rites of purification. Jesus turns the purification water into wine. You see, by the time of Jesus, an elaborate system of purification had been developed. Some things were considered pure and others impure. Women were impure for seven days after the birth of a son, fourteen days after the birth of a daughter, and whenever they menstruated. Dead bodies were impure. People with blemishes such as leprosy were impure. Certain foods were impure, and almost anything sexual was impure. The list had gotten very, very long.

In his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg sees Jesus challenging this vast purity system. It was a system that had profound implications for all of life: "... the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries; between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile...."¹

Changing water into wine was not so much the way to a great party as a way of breaking down the barriers. It was a different way

of seeing the world and God's presence in it. It is no accident that the miracle at Cana was the first sign Jesus performed in the Gospel of John. It's also no accident that the next action takes place in the temple, for the temple was at the heart of the purity system. The animals being sold there were necessary for sacrifice, and sacrifice was a prerequisite if one wanted to enter into God's presence in the temple. And so, there were economic implications. If you were poor, you couldn't afford to buy the best animals for sacrifice, and so you were excluded from the assembly of God's people. In addition, moneychangers were an essential part of the system, because it was an abomination to use Roman coins stamped with the emperor's image to buy your sacrifice; so, the moneychangers weren't simply making change for a twenty; they were giving pure tokens in exchange for impure money.

Now, I need to interrupt myself right here because this sounds as though Jesus was opposed to all things Jewish. Just as my childhood taught me to hear this story as anti-Roman Catholic, Christians have too often heard this story as anti-Jewish. But Jesus was deeply Jewish. He was shaped by the Torah, committed to teaching in the synagogue. He was not the first Jew to cry out against abusing the temple. Indeed, centuries before Jesus, a number of the prophets had declared that what God wanted - what God really wanted - was not such sacrificial offerings, but for "justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

So Jesus stood firmly in the tradition of some of Israel's greatest prophets when he challenged the purity system in his day, and challenge it he did in so many aspects of his ministry. It is no accident that so many Gospel stories talk about Jesus getting his hands dirty and walking among the unclean. In story after story, with person after person, Jesus longed to draw people back to the heart of God, back to the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." This is a commandment grounded in relationship – the relationship between God and God's people. Remember who you are, Jesus is saying, and even more importantly, remember whose you are. Your worth is not measured in categories of purity but in God's liberating miracle bringing you out of Egypt, out of exile, out of whatever bondage you were in, out of whatever binds you now.

Jesus' life and ministry challenged the rules that named things and people as pure or impure. Such categories are simply overturned by God's compassion. It is this conflict between purity codes and compassion that shapes Jesus' ministry. For in the message and activity of Jesus we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.

So it's not so strange, then, that the temple cleansing comes early in John's Gospel. When we come to the last week of Jesus' life, John again departs from the other Gospel writers. In the story we often call the Last Supper, John has no words about the bread and wine. Jesus never says, "Do this in remembrance of me." Instead, Jesus gets down on his knees and washes his disciples' dirty feet. Once more, the tables are turned. Who is the master? Who is the servant? Then Jesus says to his friends, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." By this everyone will know that you are my disciples: not by maintaining the boundaries, not by naming some pure and others impure, not by protecting the church from getting dirty, but by this love you have for one another.

It's not about bingo. It's about the deep disruptive compassion of God. May it be so among us! Amen.

Notes

- ¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 52.