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The Temple of His Body

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (John 2:13-16)

A few years ago, I came across a hymn that stopped me in my tracks. Composed by Brian Wren, it's entitled "Good Is the Flesh." Here is just one of its many verses:

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
good is the body for knowing the world,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.¹

"Good is the flesh" was not a phrase I grew up hearing in church. Though I learned early on that the Incarnation is central to Christian orthodoxy, I did not learn to link that doctrine to actual bodies, actual flesh. Much less did I learn to honor the sacred in skin, limbs, muscles, and hair—mine or anyone else's.

But that is precisely what Jesus does when he brandishes a whip, overturns the tables of the money changers, drives out the sheep and cattle, and dares his listeners to "destroy this temple" (John 2:19). They misunderstand, of course, and assume that Jesus is referring to the Herodian temple they're standing in. But no, John insists in this story. Jesus isn't referring to edifices

1. Wren, "Good Is the Flesh," 6.

built of stone or brick or wood. The home of the transcendent is not a courtyard, a parapet, or an altar. Rather, God resides in a different kind of temple altogether—the temple of Jesus's own body.

These days, I think a lot about what it means to honor human bodies as holy places. As homes for God. It's not an easy thing to do in a religious culture that too often views the body as shameful, irrelevant, or dangerous. But Jesus's encounter with the moneychangers in the temple suggests that there is a high cost involved in honoring human flesh as the home of the divine. What Jesus calls out when he "cleanses" the temple is not Judaism or its various forms of worship. It is a system of exploitation via exorbitant tithes and taxes that blocks access to the divine—that literally keeps the bodies of the poor outside the gates of the temple, forcing them into more and endless debt before they can approach and worship God.

In this story, Jesus interrupts worship for the sake of justice. He won't stand for the violation of sanctuary. He will not tolerate blocked access to God's house. He will not stomach any version of unfairness and cruelty towards the most vulnerable and beleaguered people in his society.

Jesus is a disrupter. A leveler. An up-ender. Zeal is what animates him. Fervor, not casualness. Depths, not surfaces. He is not impressed by "marketplace" faith.

Where does this leave us? Perhaps we can begin by asking honest questions about our reactions to the story itself. How do we feel about Jesus's posture, language, tone, and actions in the temple? Are we offended by his anger? His impatience? His violence? If yes, why? What cherished version of God, church, piety, or worship does Jesus threaten in this narrative?

And then: What are *we* passionate about when it comes to faith? What are we most inclined to defend or resist? What are we zealous for as members of the body of Christ? Is zeal even on our radars? Or have we settled for a way of being Christian that is more rote, safe, casual, and comfortable than it is disorienting, challenging, transformative, and missional?

We don't hear much about anger in mainline churches these days. We assume there's something unseemly about rage. Something unsophisticated, something crude. We don't consider it polite to get angry.

But Jesus—the temple of God—burns with zeal for his Father's house. He doesn't use love and forgiveness as palliatives; he allows a holy anger to move him to action on behalf of the helpless and the voiceless. In this story, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity. If human bodies are temples—holy places where heaven and earth meet—then it is incumbent upon us to protect these holy places from desecration. We need to stop believing that our highest calling is to niceness.

This cannot happen if we keep our faith lives tethered at the level of intellectual abstraction. If we live a Christianity of the mind without also living one of the flesh. After all, it is with our bodies that we experience pain, anger, terror, and joy. It's my chest that hurts when I mourn. It's my face that burns when I'm angry. It's my whole body that warms with pleasure when I'm happy.

As Christians who have inherited this story of Jesus enacting both anger and love, we need to ask ourselves where our commitment to embodied love has atrophied. Has our faith become so abstract that we no longer find it natural to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn?

Good is the flesh that the Word has become. Do we believe this? Do we believe it enough to honor all bodies as temples of God? We dare not say a glib "yes," because Jesus's boldness in the temple hastens his death. If we follow the disrupter, if we upend the temple when it neglects to serve as the Father's house, if we burn with the passion that animates Christ's coin-scattering justice, our choices will cost us. At the same time, our churches will become houses of prayer and refuge, hope and transformation. Sanctuaries of welcome for all nations.