

Sermon: Too Big Not to Fail
Text: John 2:13-22
Date: January 28, 2018
Context: WWPC
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Making a whip of cords, [Jesus] drove all of them out of the temple . . .

John 2:15

Almost all of the great stories are built around and driven by a core conflict.

Think: Gandalf and company vs. Saruman and his army of orcs. Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia and Han Solo vs. Darth Vader and the Empire. Harry, Hermione and Ron vs. Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

It's a time-honored narrative technique that has given rise to some of the most popular stories of all-time.

That certainly seems to be John's intention here, to build his account of Jesus's life around a core conflict.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all place this episode at the end of their gospels.

In their version of this story, this explosive confrontation between Jesus and the religious retailers and moneychangers who've flooded the temple is the event that precipitates his arrest and propels the story toward its harrowing climax.

But in John, it's one of the very first things Jesus does. He's baptized, he goes to a wedding where he turns water into wine, and then he goes bonkers in the temple, driving out the purveyors of sacrificial cattle, sheep and doves, and dramatically overturning the tables of the moneychangers.

On its face, most scholars agree that John uses this story as a way of underscoring Jesus's messianic identity. So he places this powerful scene right at the beginning of his gospel.

After the drama and the action subside, the scene continues with a contentious conversation between Jesus and the temple leaders in which this outsider, this would-be peasant leader, makes an astounding claim: that even if the temple were to be destroyed, even if the most sacred institution in Judaism were razed to the ground, God's messianic purposes will be fulfilled -- in him.

All of that taken together well may serve the purpose John intends for this story: of revealing to his readers Jesus's Messianic identity and setting up the conflict that will drive the story forward.

But I think it does something else, too, something John perhaps did not intend. I believe it also serves to make manifest Jesus's humanity.

For here we see Jesus in the grip of emotions every single human being who has ever lived has felt at some point: anger, indignation, even outrage.

But it turns out that Jesus is not the only person who's angry here. Most scholars also agree that John is angry, too. And the source of his anger, or maybe the target of it, is his countrymen, the Jewish community.

If you're John, there's a reason for that. It's because he believes they're missing the boat.

The Messiah has come and yet the overwhelming majority of Jews in Jerusalem and Judea have not joined his movement.

So, by shifting this story to the front of his Gospel, John is not just giving voice to Jesus's indignation. He's letting his anger fly, too.

I make this point at some length because we're going to be in John for a while. And it's important to recognize this dynamic. Because John's anger toward the Jewish community pervades his gospel.

It's an unsettling characteristic, and it has generated some fairly stiff criticism from the scholarly community in recent years.

But whether or not John's anger is appropriate -- and it may not be entirely appropriate -- it's at least understandable. Anger makes all of us do odd things, like shift the factual details of a story to suit our own agendas, our own purposes.

And this is especially true when that anger is driven by a sense of disappointment or betrayal. When it feels like institutions that we have known and depended on our whole lives fail us, or when people we've loved forever have let us down.

I vividly remember the first time this happened to me. I've written about this in a side project I'm working on, which I'll tell you more about when it's further along, and I've told this story here, too, so I'll only summarize it briefly today.

I'd gone to Haiti on a mission trip. The intention was to save souls. The first day we were there, our missionary host took us all to lunch at a Kentucky Fried Chicken. He did this, I think, to help mitigate the culture shock we were all feeling.

I placed my order, collected my meal of three-piece dark with a side of fried plantains, turned around and saw three sets of eyes staring at me through the restaurant's plate glass windows.

They belonged to three little street kids who were obviously hungry, their normally tight curly black hair, stained rusty red by the effects of chronic malnutrition.

It felt like they were pleading with me to help them, to do something to alleviate their hunger, to make their lives better, maybe more like mine.

Long story short, in the end it was my soul that was saved on that trip, because I realized that a God who only cared about the status of people's souls, and not about the status of people's bodies, a God, and a religion, that did not give two figs about the bodies of those three hungry children, well, that was not a God I wanted to follow or serve, or a religion I wanted to practice.

So that part of the story I've shared with you before. The part I may have not told is what happened next.

Short version is I went a little bonkers. Mainly because I felt betrayed. I suddenly resented all my Sunday school teachers. I felt like people I'd known and loved and trusted all my life had duped me into believing that Jesus was something other than he was.

They had taken the Jesus of the Bible, a guy who fed everyone, all the time, like some southern grandmother, and they somehow turned him into a kind of religious freak who was only interested in whether or not you went to heaven.

And it felt like they had tricked me into sharing this belief.

Looking back, I suspect the white-hot indignation I felt about this perceived betrayal would have flamed out in very short order. But then I made a terrible mistake. (Or at least it felt like a mistake at the time. Turns out it was a necessary step on my life journey--but that's a story for another time.)

In this case, I opted not to return to the Bible college that sponsored this trip. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with my life. The only thing I knew for sure is that I was done with studying how to become a televangelist.

So I left that itty bitty Bible college behind and enrolled instead in Oral Roberts University, arguably the most famous Christian university in America at the time.

This was not better. Because obviously Oral Roberts was himself a televangelist.

The whole campus was infused with his unorthodox -- let's be honest--with his heretical belief that God wants everyone to live stupendously prosperous lives, basically to have everything you ever wanted.

And all you had to do to access this limitless prosperity was to learn the secret, faith-based formula for unlocking it.

It's like Oral Roberts had followed the lead of the moneychangers and turned the whole of the Christian faith into a giant commercial operation, in which the church had become a marketplace to cultivate and indulge your wildest retail dreams.

You can see the appeal. As an impressionable young man, I likely would have fallen for this charade, too, had I not just come back from the poorest country in the Western hemisphere.

An odd detail from that time sticks out in my mind: all the buildings were made of glass, dark shiny glass.

I would walk from my dorm to the dining hall, and from the dining hall to the library, and from the library to the chapel, and everywhere I walked I could see myself reflected in that glass.

But it wasn't just my own reflection staring back at me. In my mind's eye, those same three kids I'd seen outside the KFC in Port-au-Prince stared back at me too, like ghosts that haunted my waking hours.

I would go to Chapel -- required, of course -- and none of what I heard there applied to these kids.

Even if they mastered the secret faith-based formula that informed my entire university experience, God would never bless them with a Cadillac.

They would never own a nice home with a pool. The highlight of their best day would be if someone would walk out of that fast food restaurant and give them a drumstick.

If I'd had a whip, I would have braided it. I wanted to take a baseball bat and smash all those dark, shiny windows to pieces.

I had loved the church my whole life. More than any other institution, it had nurtured me and supported me through the rollercoaster ups and downs of adolescence and young adulthood.

But in the end it felt like the church had betrayed me. And I was mad about it, and mad at everyone who'd been party to this betrayal, from my Sunday school teachers back in Rapid City, to my teachers in Bible college, to Oral Roberts himself.

I tell this story now because I think it might be relevant to how at least some of us may be feeling at present.

These continue to be very tense, very contentious times in the life of our country. There is a lot of anger in the air.

We saw this anger on display last weekend when millions of Americans took to the streets yet again to express their ongoing outrage over what's happening in and to our country.

Only in this case, it's not so much that our institutions are failing us or that they've betrayed us somehow. It's that they're under assault.

And with that assault, the values that have always made America great, that have always made America America -- well, it feels like these are now at risk.

It also happens that most of these values are deeply rooted in and drawn from the Christian tradition: compassion and welcome, honesty and integrity, kindness and civility.

And that's the part I'm personally struggling with the most at the moment. Not just the sketchy behavior of our elected officials, as troublesome as that may be. But the role faith leaders are playing in enabling this behavior.

The fact that Evangelical faith leaders in particular are willing to turn a blind eye to what seems to us to be obvious and repeated moral offenses simply because the president declares to his supporters that it's okay to say "Merry Christmas" again.

Is it just me, or does that make you angry, too?

I find myself wanting to do now what I wanted to do way back when. I want drive to the hardware store, buy a baseball bat, drive to Liberty University, and begin smashing some windows.

But here's the thing. Anger may be a completely natural response to what's happening in our country, and to the church's role in it. Indeed it may be an inevitable response to that.

But it's also true that anger is a lot like fire. Even if it starts small, it can rapidly consume us if it's left to burn unchecked.

So that creates a unique challenge for us. I love that we're a church that is outraged by the shenanigans playing out in Washington, and angered by the way certain national-level faith leaders are enabling those shenanigans.

I love that we're a church that believes and understands that God doesn't just care about our souls. A church that believes that God cares about our bodies, too. And not just our bodies, but the bodies of hungry kids in Haiti.

And about black bodies, and brown bodies, and women's bodies, and immigrant bodies and refugee bodies. God cares about everybody.

And I love that we do, too. I love that we share God's love and concern for all kinds of bodies.

So our challenge is to find ways to speak out collectively in these tense times with a prophetic voice.

To let our neighbors know that the president does not speak in our name, and Jerry Falwell does not speak in our name, and Franklin Graham does not speak in our name. And it's especially important to do this here on this campus.

To make it known that when these leaders call for immigrants to be deported, and Muslims to be banned, and for health insurance to be taken from children and poor people, and for women's rights to be rolled back, and for DACA kids to be held hostage so that walls can be built to keep brown people out of this country and help make America white again, they do not do this in our name.

But we must also speak with a pastoral voice. A voice not of anger but of love and compassion. A voice of kindness and of welcome.

Which on balance is to say, a voice very much like the voice of Jesus.