

March 3, 2024
The Third Sunday in Lent
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada
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Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

Jesus rarely loses His temper in John's Gospel, but when He does, look out. It's in John that Jesus makes a whip and uses it on the people who paid good money for their tables in the Temple. Did He have to go that far? Today we place a high value on what we call a "measured response," an action taken in proportion to the offense. I'm not sure that using a whip while upending all of the tables and driving out the livestock was proportional to the offense. What He could have done – what we almost always do in similar circumstances today – is first to get a lawyer to issue a "cease and desist" order. We try and start with that, not only because it usually does the trick; if it doesn't, we have a record of our efforts.

God actually did issue a cease and desist order nearly 1500 years before Jesus decided to enforce it in the Temple. We heard the order in our passage from Exodus but might not have recognized it. God orders us to "remember the sabbath day and keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). The meaning of the Hebrew word sabbath is cease and desist. If I had to guess, I'd guess that this commandment is the one we break most easily and most often. It might be helpful to conjure up an image of a furious Jesus with His whip when we start making our plans for Sunday. God doesn't suggest it or even urge it; God commands it, and Jesus took a very dim view of those who not only failed to observe it, but in fact turned a nice profit from it.

You might argue that Jesus isn't enforcing the sabbath as much as He is attacking the money changers and vendors in the Temple, but if His mission were to attack corruption in Jewish life, He would surely have gone after the tax collectors. If He wanted to attack the Jewish legalists, He would have gone after the Scribes and Pharisees with His whip. If He wanted to get rid of the Roman occupation and restore God's own vision of the Promised Land, He would have gone after the Romans. He did none of those things; He went after those who profaned the most sacred day of the week, the sabbath, on the holiest feast of the year, Passover. He handed them, and He hands us, a cease and desist order for the sabbath.

What we're supposed to stop doing is unique to each one of us. For God, it was the work of creation. For most of us, the sabbath arrives as a cease and desist order to refrain from whatever we determine is "business as usual." That's definitely how Jesus approached the buyers and sellers in the Temple. They would conduct their business without regard to what day of the week it was. As do we: we go and go and go all week long, often involved in affairs far less nefarious than the money-changers in the Temple, but involved nonetheless. Of course certain routine tasks cannot be ignored: animals need daily care, dogs need daily walks, people need meals. God knows that; Jesus tells us to ask God for our daily bread, even on the sabbath. We break the commandment when we turn our back on God's request/demand for our time and attention on a semi-regular basis at the very least.

Jesus doesn't break out the whip very often, any more than He calls down legions of angels to destroy those who disregard Him. But the sabbath appears to be close to His heart. We are invited today to revisit our own sabbath customs and observances, whether they happen on a Sunday, a Tuesday, or every other Friday. As for everything else He could be attacking, He does tell us to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, but to render unto God that which is God's. Remembering and keeping holy the sabbath is rendering unto God that which is God's alone.