

What Christianity is Not¹
John 2:13-22
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
March 27, 2011

Theologian Douglas John Hall is
a prolific writer and much sought after speaker.
He says that whenever he is introduced at an event
or in any way identified publicly as a *Christian* theologian,
he immediately feels like he has to explain what he is not.

I know what he means, and perhaps you do, too.
We're on the defensive these days...
not necessarily because people are anti-Christian...
but because the Christianity that makes the news these days
is hardly ever the Christianity we know and try to follow.

The Wesboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas gets in the news.
but I don't believe God is punishing America
by killing off our soldiers or sending hurricanes
because we tolerate homosexuality.

I don't believe that if you give \$10,000 to this church,
God will bless you with \$100,000.
But it's those preachers who are on TV.

I don't think the world is going to end on May 22,
but that's what the sign in Boone says...
and that's what the newspaper reported.

So when folks tell me they just can't believe in God,
I always have to ask them which God they mean.
And more often than not, once they tell me which God they mean,
I say: "Me neither! I don't believe in THAT God either."

The bottom line is that more and more these days
I feel like I'm on the defensive,
saying and trying to demonstrate what religion IS NOT.

Our Bible reading this morning
is the story of Jesus cleansing the temple.
It is a strong story...
it's a provocative story...

¹ The title and much of the content of this sermon follows closely on a piece written by John Buchanan for "Witness in Washington," a publication of the Washington, D.C. office of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., January 2008.

but it's not an EASY story.
Because it's a story about what religion is not...
and sometimes someone has to stand up
and say what religion IS NOT.

Bible Reading

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' ¹⁹Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' ²⁰The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon

There is in the Bible a running argument.

On the one side is God... and on the other side is religion.

God creates... God gives life.

God calls a people promises to love them steadfastly.

God delivers them from slavery

and gives them the Law to help them stay free.

God provides them with a land to call home.

And all God expects

for all of this undeserved and unearned goodness...

for all this great love and blessing...

ALL God expects is gratitude

and a life lived on the basis of that same love.

You know the commands by heart –

Love the Lord you God

with all your heart and mind and strength,
and your neighbor as yourself.

It's that simple... it really is THAT simple.

At least it ought to be.

But then religion enters the picture as a way

to help us love God and neighbor.

And frankly, we need the help!

We are often ungrateful.

We often forget the One who gives us all we have

and makes us all we are.

If we had our 'druthers, we would rather love ourselves first.

So religion enters the picture
as a way to organize and discipline ourselves
to do a better job of loving God and our neighbor.
Special days get set aside to help us remember things.
Rituals get designed to help us be thankful.
Rules and laws are created
to make sure everyone is doing everything right.
And it's all OK... it's all very helpful...
UNTIL a shift happens...
and all the days and rituals slowly become the goal...
the rules and laws that were meant to help us
become the whole point.

So in Scripture there is this ongoing argument
between God and the people...
and it gets *particularly heated*
between God and the really religious people.
Speaking through prophet after prophet God keeps saying:
“C’mon! You’re missing the point!”
Don’t you know that I “desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”
That’s Hosea, by the way.

Amos puts it even more bluntly:
“I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an every-flowing stream.”

Then there was Micah:
“With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
No... “He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God.”

And so one day while visiting the temple in Jerusalem,
Jesus picks up the mantle of the prophets of old
and puts it around his neck
and he takes on yet another example of religion run amuck.

Entering the first courtyard,
he comes to the booths where every adult male

has to pay the annual temple tax.
But before he pays,
he has to change his Roman coins for Hebrew money
since no coin bearing a human image is allowed in the temple.

With his tax paid, he goes to the next court
where all the inspection tables are.
The law requires that all devout Jews to make a sacrifice...
and not only that, it's very specific
about the condition of the sacrificial animals.
They must be without blemish.

So, beside the inspection tables are still more tables
where folks are selling pre-selected, pre-approved
lambs and doves, pigeons and calves.
And if you happened to have traveled a long way
to get to the temple,
you need both a moneychanger AND a local vendor
to be able to get your sacrificial animal.
The point is that it was all very necessary...
the money-changers... the vendors...
they were all very necessary
to keep the machine of religion humming along.

More than a little tongue in cheek,
Fleming Rutledge tries to bring this scene into our day:
It's Passover week, she says, and it's a mob scene.
The temple is a tourist attraction, religion at its apex.
Here are all of the religious instincts of humanity on display.
There's a liturgical dance in the sanctuary,
performance art in the courtyard,
and a rock mass in the nave.
You can buy a tour guide in the narthex,
a cookbook in the transept,
and a bumper sticker in the parish hall.
Weight Watchers meets in the Sunday School wing,
yoga in the gym, AA in the audiovisual room.
There's a prayer group in the basement,
a flower show on the front lawn,
and group therapy in the reception room.
AND... you can get your money changed
at five convenient ATM locations.²

Sometimes someone has to stand up and say what religion IS NOT...
and that's precisely what Jesus does.

² Fleming Rutledge in *The Undoing of Death*, p. 53.

He fashions a whip...
turns over the money changing tables...
knocks down the inspection booths...
throws open the doors of the animal cages
and literally runs everybody out of the place.

Well, just to be fair to all those guys he bushwhacked that day,
(guys who THOUGHT they were providing
just what the religious machinery needed)
John tells us it took forty six years to build the Temple.
Think about that - forty six years!
That's a long time... that's a lot of work!
No wonder they were in love with their temple!
No wonder they were preoccupied with it!
We all know how attached we get
to something we put that much time and energy into.

But then the SHIFT happens and
someone has to stand up and say what religion IS NOT.
It's not about a partisan political agenda...
it's about following Jesus.
It's not about us AGAINST them...
it's about us AND them as children of God.
It's not about controlling or taking over anything...
it's about doing justice
and loving kindness
and walking very, very humbly with God.
It's not about a building
or a particular program
or a treasured worship style...
it's about making sure the poor are cared for,
the excluded are always welcomed,
and the children are protected and nurtured.
It's not about getting it all just right...
it's about getting right with God and God's people.
Jesus comes and puts us on notice
that even when we think we are doing
just what he would want us to,
we may be wrong.
Even when we think we are getting it right
we may need to have our tables turned upside down

This scene in the temple has been painted by many of the "Greats,"
but perhaps none more powerfully than Rembrandt.
In this work, Christ is swinging the whip.
I don't know how you picture Jesus in your mind,

but in this one he's not a slender, frail, and pious man.
He's bulky, muscular, and filled with righteous anger.

In another work, Rembrandt steps back and sees the whole.
The scene is very crowded...

a table is hitting the floor... dogs are barking...
people are being thrown down off their seats
and are running away.

But perhaps most important,
in the upper right hand corner
(you may not be able to see it very well)...

but in the upper right hand corner
the "religious leaders" are observing the scene with great interest.

Like I say, you may not be able to recognize us,
but that's Barb and Jesse and Betsy and me.

And though we hate to admit it...
we are just then deciding that this man is too much.
He's just too much... we can't tolerate him any longer... he has to go.

It's true what Dorothy Sayers has written:
The people who hanged Christ never accused him of being a bore –
on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe.
Officialdom felt that the established order of things
would be more secure without him.
So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness."³

Needless to say, for a guy who has devoted most of his working life
to keeping the religious machinery humming along,
this makes me not a little uncomfortable.
Because what it says to me that Jesus is not passive...
that he's not just waiting patiently
for me to get around to paying attention...
that he's not always a "nice guy" when it comes down to it...
and, that in the ongoing argument between God and religion,
both in this church and in my life,
he expects God to win every time.

³ Dorothy Sayers in *The Greatest Drama ever Staged*.