

LEADING WITH LOVE AND ZEAL

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

March 4, 2018

Scripture: Psalm 69:7-16; John 2:13-22

It was a gathering of men and women clergy, Jewish, Christian, Muslim having breakfast together at Central Synagogue a year or so ago. I've attended this gathering from time to time and always grow from the experience of being with these oh-so interesting people. This particular morning we had a special guest. His Eminence Cardinal Timothy Dolan joined us for breakfast and conversation.

The Cardinal, as you know, has a winsome presence. Like an Irish kid who grew up in a Catholic neighborhood, he has a friendly, little-boy-grown-up-to-be-a-big-man, look.

Sitting around the table were rabbis, men and women leading some of the most notable synagogues of the city. There were a number of women clergy rabbis and pastors. We came from several denominations, about thirty of us at a very large table.

After the Cardinal spoke for a few minutes, there was a Q&A time to ask him whatever was on the mind of the members of the group.

There were some questions about Jewish-Catholic relationships, the position of the Roman Church on some controversial topics, and then one of the members of the group, a woman who is rector of a prominent East-side Episcopal church asked, "Your Eminence, can you tell us when you think women will be ordained in the Roman Catholic Church?"

And the cardinal, leaned back in his chair, grabbed ahold of his suspenders, smiled knowingly because I suspect he has been asked this question before. And he said, "Our women do not wish to be ordained. They are happy being the handmaidens of the Lord, teachers in our schools, members of religious orders, visiting the infirm and aged. But they do not wish to be ordained."

It was a breathtaking moment. Strange to hear a person so clearly characterizing the doctrines of his church as the desires of its women and other members. I don't think I will ever forget it.

Here were some of the brightest, most able, most gifted women pastors and rabbis in this city, all of whom are capable in so many ways and proven as leaders in their faith communities; and here was a white male religious leader who was looking right past all the women in the room; past so many of the women of his own church as well, presuming to speak for them collectively.

Now Cardinal Dolan has a doctrine or two to uphold as a prince of the Roman church but at least in this one case, perhaps it might have been good to acknowledge the women in the room who were ordained as pastors already, and with some humility offer an opening to the *Holy Spirit* to some day speak to his church in some new way. It's just a thought.

So what does that have to do with Lent? Well, this is the third Sunday of that penitential season as we move toward Jerusalem and lean into the events of Holy Week. On this day, we gather at the communion table to nourish our souls for the journey ahead at this midway point.

Now the Presbyterian Church in a fit of disjointed liturgics also encourages that on this day we celebrate the gifts of women, especially those who lead as elders, deacons, trustees, pastors, and those without whom the church would not thrive.

In part we pause to give thanks for the gifts of women because for so many years the church denied the leadership of women in ordained offices, and women weren't the only ones excluded. But remarkably we were at one time, like the Roman church, unable to envision the possibility that women might be ministers of Word and Sacrament. But that was then, 1956 to be exact, when everything changed... and this is now.

The Presbyterian materials which provide ideas about worship for today suggest that the theme be “Women Called to Lead With Love.” But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if *all* of us who lead in the church, *women and men alike*, are not called to lead with love?

And I particularly began to wonder about that theme when I read the lectionary assignment for today, the gospel of John’s account of Jesus in the temple overturning the tables of the moneychangers with a whip of cords, no less.

It’s pretty uncharacteristic of Jesus in some respects – that story – the idea of Jesus angry, causing a ruckus, zealous for purity, having a fit, overthrowing those tables. We so often think of him as Kai Hostetter-Habib pointed out to the Session this past week as the confirmation class spoke about their learnings. She said, we too often think of Jesus as Nordic, a European type, a mild-mannered man who looked like us and acted like we ought.

And in other ways we box Jesus into a very defined role. We think of him passing along divine wisdom, gathering children around him and saying “Let the children come to me.” We think of him speaking about love and teaching us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. “Love one another as I have loved you,” he said

We picture him talking with the woman at the well, or defending the woman taken in adultery when the men chasing her wanted to stone her, or healing the woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for 12 years. All of that seems natural to him. But a whip of cords, and the violent overthrow of tables in the temple courtyard? That doesn’t seem to fit the picture of the Jesus most of us have in mind.

Now a word about the temple money changers and what they were doing there. My friend Agnes Norfleet, pastor at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church writes, “No doubt some ... will need to be reminded of the temple’s system of sacrifice with animals for the wealthy, doves for the poor, and how the Roman coins were deemed impure [because of Caesar’s likeness on it, Caesar who claimed to be a god]. Those Roman coins had to be traded for temple coins, for a fee, a system that inevitably led to abuse.

The New Testament scholar, Gail O’Day, points out that Jesus is not confronting here the abuses of the economic system in which the traders skim off the top. But rather alluding to [our Old Testament lesson today] Zechariah 14:21, the scene that relays the prophetic expectation that “there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.” [So] Jesus’ challenge is more sweeping because he calls into question the authority of the Temple as the institutional seat of God.”¹

And a word, too, about zeal, the quality that drives Jesus to overturn the tables and chase out the cattle and sheep. *Zeal* comes from a Hebrew root word that means “...to burn. Its synonyms include: passion, fervor, vehemence, intensity, fire and emotion.”² It’s neither a good thing nor a bad thing in and of itself. But clearly, the hot actions of Jesus in the temple reminded the disciples who saw him in action of the prophetic explanation that “Zeal for God’s house will consume me.”

So along with Love, I would nominate *Zeal* as being a quality that a prophet, or a pastor, or a savior might need in abundance and in particular I think the women and men who serve as leaders in the church will need a healthy sprinkling of zeal in their armamentarium of necessary qualities.

By questioning the Temple as the locus of God’s activity, Jesus goes on to explain that his body is now the Temple of God, and when he speaks of tearing it down and building it up in three days, we know that he is not talking about the stones that took forty-six years to pile up in just the right way to be the place where sacrifices would be offered to forgive the sins of the people.

A little zeal may be what the world most needs right now. I have been astounded that young people in school, teenagers and their families affected directly and indirectly in the attack at the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, have raised a new dimension for the discussion about guns in

our society, especially assault rifles, zeal that they have expressed that has done more in the last couple of weeks to change the debate about guns proliferating as they are in a way that the Sandy Hook shootings did not.

While Sandy Hook touched our hearts with empathy and compassion, the Stoneman Douglas response has been these kids themselves rallying for change, pressing for legislation, opposing those who would resist hearing new voices. And I believe it is because of the zeal that we see in these high school students that gives them a voice of authenticity. Their zeal comes as new voices in the discussion, stakeholders in the outcome because they were the ones directly in the line of fire.

I don't know whether in the long run there will be change in the availability of automatic weapons in this country, but the zeal of youth gives me hope that something new may happen in a way that could not and has not before. Zeal can be a good thing when it is borne of a desire to save and protect life, to do justice, and to channel thinking in a right direction.

And if zeal can drive change in our society, so can zeal enable the church to be more faithful.

Tod Bolsinger in his book **Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory** writes about the kind of church that we are called to be and the kind of leadership that is required to help a congregation be a faithful church especially in a time of change. He writes,

Leadership isn't so much skillfully helping a group accomplish what they *want* to do (that is management). Leadership is taking people where they *need* to go and yet resist going. Leadership... is energizing a community of people toward their own transformation in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world.³

I think about the time that lies ahead for this congregation. Times of transition in this church have called for this congregation to reimagine the future which will not be the same as the past, especially in a city like New York where everything is changing all the time. The coffee shop that was on the corner is now a bank with ATM's. The grocery store where your evening meal was so convenient to pick up, is now a barber shop. The Chinese restaurant with the great General Tso's chicken is now the footprint for a high-rise luxury building.

It's as if the tables were constantly being upended and the doves and cattle driven out, making ready for what comes next.

We forget that the meal that we share around this table was once a Passover meal that Jesus gave it new meaning. "This is my body," he said, taking the bread in his hands and tearing it. "This is my blood," he said, passing the cup with wine. In both cases he was breaking the mold, doing something new, calling upon imagination and faithfulness to establish his place.

Our model in the church for leadership is Jesus, who had to break open the closed system that was the Temple. He teaches us that if we are to be faithful, we must be ready to see that the past is only prelude to the future, that what is yet to be will be different from what the past has been.

I love the model of the church's future that Bolsinger describes. He says that the church's situation is somewhat comparable to the venture experienced by Lewis and Clark. When they were getting their rigging for that famous exploration, they loaded up with canoes and other passage supplies. But Bolsinger says there was an immediate problem part way through the trip.

As he stepped off the map into uncharted territory, Meriwether Lewis discovered that what was in front of him was nothing like what was behind him and that what had brought him to this point in the journey would take him no farther. Lewis faced a daunting decision: What would he do now? Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery were looking for a water route, but now they had run out of water. *How do you canoe over mountains?*

You don't. If you want to continue forward, you change.

You look at the snow-capped mountains ahead of you and change your approach.⁴

Today we as a church, a New York City church, a Presbyterian Church, a Christian church, a twenty first century community of faith are facing a moment like that moment in 1956 when Margaret Towner was ordained, the first woman minister of word and sacrament in the United Presbyterian Church. Nobody knew where it would lead. It was a moment like that moment when Lewis left the known territory and ventured into the unknown. But with love and zeal and with the creativity to imagine a new future different from the past, following where God was leading... just look at how far God has taken us.

It will take love and zeal and imagination, in the years ahead for the church's leaders. Some tables will likely be overturned in the process; some cattle and sheep driven out. But with God's leading, just imagine how far God will take you.

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¹ Agnes Norfleet, Moveable Feast Paper, 2018, March 4, Year B, unpublished. Quoting Gail O'Day, **The New Interpreters Bible**, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 543.

² Norfleet, *ibid*.

³ Tod Bolsinger, **Canoeing the Mountain: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory**. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015. 124.

⁴ *Ibid*