**Consuming Zeal** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Third Sunday in Lent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 2:13-22 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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This past month (February) was Black History Month, and many continue to bask in memories, tributes, and outright celebrations of the day, more than 60 years ago (August 28, 1963), when *Martin Luther King Jr.* delivered his most lauded speech. Culturally, broad swaths of our society embrace the *March on Washington* as a singular national event, we marvel at the many thousands who filled the National Mall as heroes, and we nearly worship King’s *“Dream”* unequivocally.

Clarence B. Jones, one of King’s closest advisors, [suggests the reception of the speech on that day was not much different from our remembrance now](http://www.nationaljournal.com/daily/after-i-have-a-dream-speech-a-shudder-went-through-me-and-through-the-nation-20130826):

*“Everyone on the Mall and a whole lot of people watching on their tiny television sets were aware that they had just experienced something transcendent. The “I Have a Dream” speech was less than a minute old, yet it already felt timeless. Martin had reached deep, and, with a prod in the right direction from the angelic Mahalia Jackson, produced a way to paint a portrait of how it felt to be black in America.”*

King’s speech made him a mountain of a man, both *admired* and *feared.* It confirmed his position as a preeminent *moral authority* in America, and, according to an FBI assessment, the single most dangerous African American leader in the nation.

These two titles go together. King’s power stemmed from his ability to, as Jones contends, *“challenge the conscience of America.”* When King began to speak extemporaneously about his dream of a just nation, he offered the American creed (from the Declaration of Independence—that *“we are all created equal”)*. To deny anyone that creed was to deny that the nation had a soul, and King’s rhythmic admonitions and rhetoric were driven by the recognition that such injustice had been perpetrated for more than 200 years. King had not merely challenged the conscience of America but also implanted his moral authority within it.

Such prophetic power had limits, though. King’s moral authority rang throughout America and down through generations when he used it to affirm the American creed. However, when he claimed that *war in Vietnam* had poisoned this creed, his moral authority ran into a stone wall.

On April 4, 1967—exactly a year before he was assassinated—[King spoke from the pulpit of the Riverside Church in upper Manhattan](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_beyond_vietnam_4_april_1967/). He addressed a huge audience that evening at the invitation of *Clergy and Laity Concerned* about Vietnam. He came to denounce his nation’s war.

*“Now, it should be incandescently clear,”* King observed, *“that no one who had any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America****will be,*** *are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.”*

King’s Riverside address did not endear him to the press, the public, or even to his own advisors. Carl Rowan, a Black journalist with access to Lyndon Johnson, said that the president was *“flushed with anger.”*

Moreover, King’s colleagues in the *Southern Christian Leadership Council* worried that his stance would hurt the movement financially and politically. *“The tragedy is not that King is going to the peace issue but that he’s leaving civil rights,”* said one close associates. *“And how are you going to denounce Lyndon Johnson one day and ask him the next day for money for poverty, schools, housing?”* A Harris Poll showed that 73 percent of Americans polled disagreed with King’s position on the war, and 60 percent believed his opposition to the war would hurt the civil rights movement. Forty-five percent of Black respondents also disagreed with King.

And yet he persisted. *Why?* Again, Clarence Jones provides insight—King’s moral authority was not tempered to fit the times:

*“If he were still here today, he would in my opinion have emerged as the preeminent moral spokesperson for America. Not the preeminent spokesperson for Black America, but for America. . . He was such a unique person in the history of our country that I think things would have been different. I think he would have continued to challenge the conscience of America. . . Remember, he was unalterably committed to nonviolence. Unalterably. His position was either nonviolence or non-existence, nonviolence, or co-annihilation. There was no middle ground for him. There was no compromise on this issue.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

I share this with you because our Gospel reading today describes a very similar situation that Jesus finds himself in.

You see, this story, commonly called the *“cleansing of the temple,”* (though the phrase is not in the gospels), would best be called, as we will see, the *“indictment of the temple.”*

The event occurred in the court of the temple, a very large open area of about twenty-four acres bordered by columned porticoes. The temple building itself was small by comparison. Somewhere within the open courtyard, pilgrims could purchase animals for sacrifice and change money into the proper coinage for paying the temple tax. *This is the activity that Jesus disrupted:* he drove out the sellers and the buyers and overturned the tables of those changing money and the seats of those selling doves. Then, Jesus would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. Not surprisingly, all of this drew a crowd, and then Jesus taught.

Now, if we visualize the story historically, we cannot easily imagine that Jesus did all of this by himself. Presumably, some of his followers helped him. *We also need to imagine it as limited in scope and duration.* If Jesus and his followers had taken control of the whole temple court and held it for hours, the imperial troops stationed on the porticoes and garrisoned in the adjacent *Fortress Antonia* would have intervened. So we need to imagine that the disruption was brief (a few minutes? half an hour?) and in a limited area. From a distance, it could look like a minor disturbance that was soon over with.

*What did this act mean? Why did Jesus do this?* It is inadequate to refer to it as his *“temple tantrum,”* as if he were suddenly filled with anger at what he saw there, surprised that such things were going on. Rather, *the act looks very intentional.* It was deliberate, thought out in advance.

Also inadequate is perhaps the most common reading of the story at the popular level, which says that *commercial activity—*selling and buying and changing money—should not be going on in a place of worship. For many, naming the story as the *“cleansing of the temple”* means that Jesus sought to purify the temple by ridding it of money changers and vendors.

*But* this interpretation does not work historically. The sellers of sacrificial animals and the money changers were not *illicit or corrupt,* but traditional; they provided a necessary service for the functioning of the temple. If you were a pilgrim who had traveled many miles (and some came hundreds of miles), it was much more convenient to purchase your sacrifice in Jerusalem than to carry it with you from home. Moreover, there is evidence that prices and exchange rates were closely regulated, so the issue was *not* that pilgrims were being fleeced by sharp merchants.

Fortunately, we do not have to guess at its meaning—Jesus interpreted the act himself, as prophets who performed prophetic acts in the Jewish Bible often did. In other words, his disruptive act became the occasion for him to teach—and this may be the reason that he, and presumably his followers, would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple—this was a time of paying attention to what Jesus had to say.

First, he said, *“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.’ But you have made it a den of robbers.”*

The first part is from Isaiah 56:7, which says the purpose of the temple is to be *“a house of prayer for all the nations.”* The second part echoes Jeremiah 7, part of what is called Jeremiah’s *“temple sermon.”* Standing in the gate of the temple, Jeremiah warned that it would be destroyed unless those who worshiped there began to practice *justice:*

*“If you truly amend your ways and doings, if you truly act justly with one another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, … then I [God] will dwell with you in this place” (7:5-7).*

Then, still speaking in the name of God, Jeremiah said, *“Has this house [the temple], which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?”*

In what sense had the temple become a den of robbers according to Jeremiah? It was a den of robbers precisely because it had become the center of an oppressive system *that did not practice justice but* exploited the most vulnerable in society. It was an indictment of the powerful and wealthy elites of his day, centered in the monarchy and temple. Their everyday injustice made them robbers, and they thought of the temple as their safe house and place of security.

*Thus,* when Jesus called the temple *“a den of robbers,”* he indicted the temple authorities as robbers who collaborated with the robbers at the top of the imperial domination system (Rome). They had made the temple into a den of robbing and violence. So, Jesus’ action was not cleansing the temple, but an *indictment of the temple.* The teaching explains the act. Indeed, it was the reason for the act.

And it was the kind of deed that could get one into trouble, *and it did.* The temple authorities decide that Jesus must die: *“And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him.”* But they did not take action immediately. Why not? *“They were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching”* (Mark 11:18). The crowd, the people, were with Jesus. The implication is that they too resented the role that the temple played in the imperial system.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Do you see the parallels between what I shared earlier about Martin Luther King Jr. and this story about Jesus?

This is interesting because acts of *moral courage* (like MLK and Jesus) are permeated by *two great mysteries*. The *first* is why such actions are so *uncommon* despite the fact that almost every moral system and faith tradition encourages them. Christians, for example, are summoned to follow in Jesus’ path, but even when picking up a cross means only taking small risks, many desert and flee. *“It is curious,”* mused Mark Twain, *“that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.”*

*Motivation* is the *second* mystery. *“At the center of our moral life,”* said Susan Sontag, *“are the great stories of those who have said no.”* But why do ordinary people sometimes summon the courage to resist in the face of great societal pressure?

Eyal Press raises this question over and again in his book, *Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times,* where he shares the stories of people who were neither moral nor spiritual virtuosi, nor were they iconoclasts who by temperament flaunt society’s values. To the contrary, they were truly ordinary people who believed so firmly in a vision of a *just world* that its values seemed inviolable.

Similarly, theologian Arthur McGill said it is of little use to urge people to be brave or selfless. *“Whether people serve themselves or serve others,”* he said, *“is not in their power to choose. This is decided wholly in terms of the world in which they think they live . . .. In New Testament terms, they live or die according to the king that holds them and the kingdom to which they belong.”*

Friends, in a sharply divided society such as ours, one wonders how we Americans would receive the towering moral courage of King if he were alive today and why, conversely, so many Christians seem not the least bit interested in following the example of Jesus—even in the small things.

But it’s the quiet moral courage of millions of ordinary people (acting in both large and small ways) that gives me *hope.* They are the ones who will lead us through the current cultural impasse; they are the ones who may get into what some have called *good trouble* and likely may suffer negative consequences, and yet, will show us the way by appealing to our better angels so that we all can have a brighter tomorrow*.*

Ours is such a time where great moral courage is needed—to speak the truth in love, to stand with the marginalized, and to resist the *den of robbers* in our modern-day temples (both literal and figurative).

Jesus wants to know if we are up to the task at hand.

1. Raymond Haberski, Jr., *MLK’s Moral Authority,* The Christian Century, September 4, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary,* Harper San Francisco, 2006, pp. 234-236 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)