

Wine Before Breakfast

October 22, 2013

John 2.13-24

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There was a man who had two sons. The older one said to his father, "Father, give me a staff, a cloak, some sandals and a small purse; I want to visit our family up north" The father set these things aside. The older son gathered himself and traveled north, while the younger son stayed behind to manage the father's house.

After some time, word reached the older son that his father would be throwing himself a birthday banquet. Homesickness welled up in the son and he set out for home.

While the older son was still a long way off, the overflow of sound from the house ran out to meet him. But once he approached the house, the relief and joy of homecoming drained out of him.

He saw the long dining table crowded with bills and coin. The feast food was pushed to the side, the drinks left un-poured. Friends of the younger brother swarmed about, shouting to one another across the table, bartering and haggling for their food stuffs and homemades. Some, it's true, had travelled a good distance to attend the party, and were anxious to acquire a gift for their host; the locals had foreseen the need and had arrived with their own carts full of goods. While some guests braved the chaos and found their way to the table, others stood at the edges, awkward, confused, and overwhelmed. Still others joined the frenzy of buy and sell.

All the while the younger son was lost in the crowd.

Worst of all, the elder son could see no sign of his father—until, that is, he spied a lone shadowed figure, sitting unnoticed in the corner of the room.

Somewhere inside the older son felt something snap.

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Call it the parable of the prodigally pissed off son. It's the story that John tells in chapter 2 of his gospel.

Not all homecomings can be happy ones.

One one level, that's an old, old story.

Who can forget the the legendary Odysseus?

He set out from home

lost himself in a far-away land,

clawed his way home only find his estate

devoured by insidious suitors,

who were camped out in the Odysseus' hall,

freeloading, ogling, and plotting their takeover

until, that is, Odysseus comes in and strings his bow,

unleashes all manner of unholy hell,

and reconquers his home.

Another unhappy homecoming.

Like Odysseus, Jesus returns home unrecognized.
Like Odysseus, Jesus finds his home compromised.
Like Odysseus, Jesus burns with anger,
 takes up a weapon,
 turns the place upside down,
 and evicts the intruders.

But you know as well as I do that Jesus is no Odysseus.

Odysseus' homecoming
 racks up a body count.
 Unwelcome guests are
 run through, bled out, and hanged,
 and the house is doused in sulfur,
 set ablaze in a purging fire.

This is Odysseus in *all* his glory,
Odysseus patching up his wounded pride.
Homecoming with a vengeance.

Jesus' homecoming is quite different, though not, because it's so much rosier. It's not.

If anything Jesus' passover visit to his Father's house is *more* unsettling, *more* enigmatic. The gentle Jesus I thought I knew brandishes a whip and shouts, "Take these things out of here! Stop making *my Father's house* a marketplace!"

In *The Odyssey* Homer goes out of his way to justify Odysseus grand revenge fantasy come true. But John doesn't even really make it clear why the moneychangers and bird-sellers get singled out for one of Jesus' tongue-lashings. Even Ol' St. Augustine scratched his head at this one. Some say the money changers were inflating their exchange rates. Others wonder if the pigeon merchants were extorting the poor rural worshippers who could only afford the more humble sacrifice of a bird. But *John* doesn't say that any of that.

The only thing Jesus points out is the gap between
 home and market;
 between worship and the peddling of wares.

The temple is (supposed to be)
 the place where the God of Israel lives with his people,
 the place they meet to exchange gifts, to offer thanksgiving, to receive forgiveness,
 the place where heaven and earth meet.

When Jesus looks at the moneychangers and merchants in the temple courts and — he sees a distraction, he sees disregard — he sees a small but fatal subversion at the heart of Israel's life.

Jesus is plain *jealous* for the space where God meets his people, and it seems he won't stand for *anything* getting in the way — not out of Odysseus-like hubris, or out of a sense of violated honour. No. "Zeal for *your house* consumes me; the insults of those who insult *you* have fallen on *me*," says the psalm the disciples remember. Jesus loses it out of sheer, unglued, fanatical love for the Father and his house.



But I don't think the biggest difference between Odysseus and Jesus lies in their motivation.

It's in the body count.

When the dust settles from Jesus' temple homecoming,
there will be only be one body broken.

Because the truth is that from the moment that Jesus takes up the whip and brings the temple courts to a grinding halt, his fate is sealed. The powers that be can't risk this one-man-riot disrupting the peace, not even in God's name. If word were to reach the Romans, well, everyone knows all too well how Caesar and his henchman respond to revolution.

But for now, the scene draws to a close not with an arrest, but with a riddle:

"Who do you think you are?"

The Jewish authorities demand.

"And what sign can you show us that would give you the right to do this in the temple?"

"Destroy *this* temple,"

Jesus answers,

"and I will raise it up in three days."

"He was speaking," John tells us, "about the temple of *his body*."

Here is a claim far more radical than anything even the wildest prophets of the past had spoken. When all is said and done, Jesus' critique of the temple is *himself*. He is the Word who was with God and *was* God in the beginning and *now* is tabernacling in Galilean flesh. If ever there was a temple worthy of the name, it's him.

Jesus' own body, John says, has become
the place where the Creator God lives with his people,
he place they meet to exchange gifts, to offer thanksgiving, to receive forgiveness,
the place where heaven and earth meet.

And if *that's* true, then John has set the stage for an irony as deep and dark as anything you find in a Greek tragedy: precisely *because* of the Jewish leaders defend the temple, they will tear down the temple of Jesus' body. Their zeal for *this* temple destroys *the* temple.

And yet, as always, God's comedy runs deeper than any human tragedy.

Because in his zealous love,

Jesus allows himself to be consumed, burned to the ground,

so that he can give his body, broken and glorified,

to be the permanent place where the whole world meets the Father.

Jesus commandeers their act of demolition

to serve his work of construction.

Jesus absorbs their act of hatred and exclusion,

and folds it into God's great movement of love and embrace.

We call that good news.

Because if you're like me, then, you'd like to be Jesus in this story. It's nice to imagine ourselves cleansing the temple. (And let's be honest, if there's any group I know is called and gifted and even inclined to crack the whip, to upset the tables and to name the compromises embedded in the status quo, then it's you, sisters and brothers.)

But all it takes is one look at the Jewish leaders in the story to see that the story not only reveals something about Jesus, but it reveals something about us us too. Even at what we think is our very best, we can end up doing our very worst.

In ways we know all too well,
we trade the self-giving way of Jesus
for brittle ideologies, for abrasive orthodoxies;
we sell ourselves out,
we compromise,
we lose the plot,
we make our selves and our churches
inhospitable
both to our self-giving God,
and to those around us who so badly need to meet him in us.

So before we can ever be zealous homemakers in the way of Jesus,
we need to be shown up as the well-intentioned homewreckers we are.

We need the unyielding honesty and the impassioned housecleaning of Jesus.

And this truth, no matter ugly, actually does set us free because this is where God's deep-comedy-gospel breaks in:

Jesus has already trumped, overruled and deconstructed
every obstacle that would stand between us and God —
even when that obstacle is us.

I mean,

you make Jesus your enemy and he goes and *befriends* you;
you tear Jesus down and he uses the rubble to build you a home..

He won't even let you lose on your own terms.

That's the God of the Gospel for you,
a God so for us that even we can't be against us.

And I am convinced that
neither piety,
nor misplaced religious zeal,
nor selling out,
nor homebreaking,
nor death itself
can separate us from the prodigal, homemaking love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John the storyteller invites us to open ourselves
to a God reckless enough to move into the neighbourhood
with a bunch of homebreakers like us.

And if it's as hard for you to believe that as it is for me, that's okay too. Because John doesn't get tired of telling us.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

*Destroy this temple
and I will raise it up in three days.*

*Woman, I tell you the truth, a time is coming and now is
when you will worship the Father
neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem
. . . but in Spirit and truth.*

*In my Father's house there are many rooms.
I go and prepare a place for you.*

*Those who love me and keep my word,
my Father will love them too,
and we will come and make our home with them.*

Amen.

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