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First Presbyterian Church
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John 2:13-22

“Thoughts and Prayers: Prayer as Protest and Public Witness”

Today I’m beginning a new sermon series titled “Thoughts and Prayers”. Back in the spring when I was soliciting your suggestions for sermons, this one was brought to me by David McCants who had recently become aware of the number of different ways our very own Book of Common Worship lists the ways in which we pray.

The Book of Common Worship states:

“W-5.0102 : Prayer in Daily Life

*We respond to God’s grace through the gift of prayer. **The Christian life is one of constant prayer, as the challenge of everyday discipleship requires daily disciplines of faith. Prayer is a way of opening ourselves to God, who desires communication and communion with us. Prayer may take a variety of forms, such as: conscious conversation with God; attentive and expectant silence; meditation on Scripture; the use of service books, devotional aids, and visual arts; and singing, dancing, labor, or physical exercise. The Church’s pattern of daily prayer (W-5.0202) may be adopted as an individual practice of faith. Prayer may also be expressed in action, through public witness and protest, deeds of compassion, and other forms of disciplined service.”***

I’ve long believed that prayer takes more forms than what we typically think of as prayer, but there were a few on the list that surprised me, like exercise. But there were many that intrigued me and are worth our exploration. Especially the one we’re going to discuss today, and that is prayer as protest or public witness. This is an important one.

I don’t think I’m alone when I say I’m tired of hearing someone say in the face of injustice or yet another tragedy, “offering my thoughts and prayers.” In today's society, is it any wonder the phrase "offering our thoughts and prayers" has turned into a meme, an empty phrase lacking action or genuine intent? I mean, at some point our prayers need to grow legs and feet and take to the streets in

protest; or grow arms and hands and start writing our legislators. When bigots push their agenda, or another mass shooting happens, or people are “othered” into submission, or the earth groans under our weight, “we need some hands and feet, heads and hearts praying and working together” (Rev. Raphael Warnock, National Prayer Breakfast, 2016).

Frederick Douglass, who became one of the most charismatic and forceful leaders of the abolition movement, briefly embraced Christianity but abandoned it, observing that it did so little to soften the behavior of slave owners. He’s attributed to saying that Either:

- Praying for freedom never did me any good ‘til I started praying with my feet.
- I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century who walked with Dr. Martin Luther King at Selma, said of that walk “For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”

This is not to say that traditional prayer isn’t important. It is. But it is also important to see that when we do something to make the world a better place, when we use our feet to pray, that is a real powerful prayer. Yet we’ve forgotten that. But Jesus’ actions in the temple – in the story we heard today -- reveal to us the importance of embodying our prayers in tangible actions, especially in the face of injustice and oppression.

When our story from John opens, it’s Passover. Passover, as you know, is a high, holy day for Jews. People came from all over the area to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. If you were a faithful Jew, you made the pilgrimage no matter what.

Jesus is a faithful Jew, so like everyone else he comes to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. When he gets there he goes to the temple because the temple is where you celebrate Passover.

Now, the temple was a magnificent place. Herod the Great had begun a massive restoration of the temple about 50 years before Jesus; it was Herod’s way of

trying to win over his subjects. And the expansion was still underway in Jesus' day. It must have been a sight to behold.

The temple courtyard was open to anyone, even Gentiles. And it was sort of like a modern-day farmer's market, but this market included animals and moneychangers in addition to fruits and vegetables. It was also a very noisy place because cattle, sheep, turtledoves, people and coins make noise.

Now, you might think, "Why the heck is there a farmer's market in the temple's front yard?"

Well, the market was necessary to keep the temple operating. For example, people had to pay a tax to the temple, and that tax had to be paid in temple currency, so money changers were necessary. You see, the normal currency had the image of the emperor on its coins, but because no graven images were allowed within the temple walls, those coins couldn't be used to pay the temple tax. So moneychangers were available in the outer courtyard to exchange legal coins for temple coins so people could pay their temple tax.

The same is true for the animals. People were expected to sacrifice a blemish free animal in the temple. So vendors sold animals outside the temple for people who made the long trek to Jerusalem without one, or for people whose animal became blemished during the trek.

The exchange of money and selling of animals was necessary to keep the temple functioning. And in order to make it easier for people to do their necessary part to keep the temple running, the courtyard was set-up as a convenience for the worshippers; it was never meant to be a hindrance.

What Jesus saw that day, what got him so angry, was that while the temple appeared to be fulfilling its purpose, closer inspection revealed that it had really lost its way. The people were offering their thoughts and prayers, but they didn't appear to be doing much of anything else.

SO when Jesus entered the temple that day, and discovered that, he was outraged outrage. So he made a whip, and moving through the market with it, he created holy havoc. He left no table unturned and no one untouched.

“Out! All of you! Get these things out of my father’s house. They don’t belong here!”

Jesus is angry. Very angry. Anyone who makes a whip and uses it in a public place in the manner in which he did, is angry.

This is not the Jesus we like to meet. Generally, we prefer Jesus nice and sedated. The kind we meet in pictures in old Bibles, the one who is surrounded by sheep and children and looks a little like our older brother with a beard. We like that Jesus. We understand that Jesus. We can relate to that Jesus. That Jesus is nice and kind and doesn’t want to upset anyone.

Of course, in the Bible we also meet a Jesus who is loud and prophetic and upsets the apple cart, just like today. And while we get a little on edge with that Jesus, there’s something about that that is attractive. We like to stand up and cheer for the Jesus who rights the wrongs of the world.

Reading this, we may even be tempted to take up the whip with him and denounce the moneychangers and sheep herders and anyone else who’s doing things they shouldn’t be doing. And yet, Jesus’ anger is not really directed at the shepherders or moneychangers; Jesus knew they were doing their job to keep the temple running smoothly and assist the Passover worshippers.

No, Jesus’ anger is directed at all the people who had forgotten that