

Tearing Down and Rebuilding the Church, March 4, 2018
(Sydenham Street and Chalmers United Churches, Kingston)

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Paul Shupe, a biblical scholar, has commented on today's gospel lesson in *Feasting on the Word*: He writes:

Surely all preachers feel queasy in the pit of the stomach when Jesus takes up his whip and drives the money changers from the temple. Queasy because along with the surge of righteous adrenaline that is produced when Jesus shifts into his prophetic mode comes the sneaking fear that we might have more in common with the targets of his judgement than with the righteousness of his cause.
(Paul C. Shupe in *Feasting on the Word* p. 92)

I admit to some queasiness. I often find myself in the camp of those who are the recipients of Jesus' judgement (much as I'd like to be among the righteous ones). This United Church of ours is known as a church that endorses social justice in terms of the rights of indigenous peoples, eliminating poverty and trade injustice, anti-racism, environmental issues, and fighting oppression of all kinds. I also support those causes – in my personal commitments, as well as in the work I do at the Bay of Quinte Conference office. I believe the United Church is doing “the right thing”. And I know that the two congregations present here – Sydenham Street and Chalmers, have been active in these causes as well – setting up a Truth and Reconciliation action group, Sydenham Street becoming an affirming congregation. I know that many of you have been involved in refugee sponsorship and knitting prayer shawls. Those are all good things, important in the process of building up the church and living out Christ's mission.

Now, you may be wondering about my sermon title, “Tearing down and rebuilding the church”. There might be those who say that the United Church is being torn down. It certainly appears likely that our structure will be very different a year from now. But institutions and structures are always changing. Is there something we can learn from today's gospel lesson?

In reading and thinking about the gospel passage, I kept coming back to the question – why did Jesus throw out the vendors and money changers in the temple? After all, they were providing a necessary and legitimate service. Since the Jerusalem temple was the site where required animal sacrifices took place, the people coming in had to have a way of obtaining the animals (which had to be unblemished – very difficult, given the long journeys most people had to make). And, since this was near the time of Passover, there would have been many pilgrims and visitors from all over coming to fulfill their religious duties. But before you picture a sanctuary (like this one) filled with cattle, sheep, and birds (not to mention all the noise and smell), I will say that this marketplace was actually located in the outer courts of the temple, not inside the building itself – perhaps in something like a parking area (or the corner of Barrie and Clergy). And the money changers were necessary because it was against Jewish law to pay the temple tax (which was something like the offerings we give in church) with coins having graven images on them. Such coins, which were the usual currency in the markets of Jerusalem and throughout the Empire, had to be exchanged for “temple shekels” in order to contribute to the temple.

Also, the way John tells the story there is no mention of any cheating or wrong-doing by the merchants and money changers. Contrary to what we find in the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John’s gospel does not have Jesus saying, “You have made God’s house a den of thieves.” Instead, he says, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.” But the dramatic impact of Jesus’ action is evident in all four gospels – he didn’t just ask them nicely to “please leave.” No, he drove out the vendors and money changers (with a whip, according to John). And he pushed over the tables, sending coins and whatnot flying everywhere. This is no “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” This is someone with an important point to raise – a challenge.

I think Jesus is challenging those in the temple to pay attention to their own laws – and not just to the letter of the law, but to the spirit of the law. We read that the disciples remembered it was written, “Zeal for your house (meaning the temple) will consume me” (a quote from Psalm 69). These words are a challenge to those whose commitment to the letter of the law had blinded them to the spirit of the law – to the truth of Jesus, the one who comes in the name of God. The zeal of some people for the proper rituals of the temple (without taking into account God’s Spirit of wisdom and compassion) would soon mean the death of Jesus. The temple was a means to an end – the end (or goal) being worship of God and living in the presence of the Holy One. The temple was not an end in itself. According to John, it had been under construction for 46 years. (The United Church of Canada has been under construction for over 90 years.) The temple (and its associated rituals) could be destroyed – as it in fact was in the year 70 CE. But the spirit of the law, the Spirit of God in Christ, could not be destroyed.

In John’s gospel the cleansing of the temple takes place near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, while in the other gospels, the same story is recorded as occurring near the end of his ministry (shortly before the crucifixion), and is actually given as a reason for his arrest. Yet even in today’s reading from John’s gospel the words point ahead to Jesus’ death and resurrection. The words of Jesus, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” are taken to refer to Jesus’ body being put to death and then raised to life. Remember the biblical references to the body being the temple of the Lord.

Another thing to remember is that the church is often referred to as “the body of Christ”. The church (as a human institution) can also be destroyed (or torn down) – and can be seen to have been so, at several points in its history. The early church, with followers of Jesus often persecuted and having to hide from the authorities, went through a drastic transformation in the

fourth century, when Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Of course, this was good in many ways – no more persecution and hiding. But it also meant that abuses could creep in and controversies about theology and practice were more open. The church grew rapidly, but perhaps discipleship was not as strong for many. Then, around the end of the first millennium, there was a big split, when the western (or Roman) church separated from the eastern (or Greek Orthodox) church. During the Middle Ages more controversies and abuses were noted, and rebel groups of Christians began to appear, although for the most part, the official church made sure that these “heresies” did not spread. Then came the sixteenth century with Martin Luther, John Calvin and others, who were the spiritual ancestors of the many Protestant denominations we have today. The church was blown apart by those changes. Many thought it was being torn down. BUT – the body of Christ cannot be destroyed. The Spirit of God in Christ has continued to work through the whole church – in all its manifestations, including The United Church of Canada.

Some would say that it’s time for another big shakedown – of the universal Christian body. Perhaps that’s true. Of course, we’re having our own mini-shakedown of the United Church. Structures are changing (perhaps being torn down). But again, the church is in the business of resurrection, not by our own actions, but by the power of God. The Spirit is still at work – and we need to trust that God’s Spirit will continue to give us guidance and wisdom as we seek to carry on the ministry of Christ. I have seen that ministry most ably carried out by many volunteers throughout the Bay of Quinte Conference. In my work I see people dedicated to ensuring inclusion of the LGBTQ community, living into right relationship with indigenous peoples, welcoming refugee families, working to combat racism and environmental devastation.

All that work needs to continue. Some of our structures may be coming down, but the mission, through networks of volunteers, like many in this place, will continue.

In Bay of Quinte Conference we have ongoing presentations to Presbyteries on anti-racism. We have workshops to encourage and support ministries in the process of becoming Affirming. We are putting together a booklet about the work that many congregations have done to welcome and support Syrian refugee families. We have had events to encourage response to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We are supporting MP Romeo Saganash's Bill C-262 There is an event called "**Sharing a Path of Reconciliation**" coming up on **April 14th at Glenburnie** (just north of here) with special guest **MP Charlie Angus** and a **traditional indigenous meal**. It is being co-sponsored by three presbyteries: Four Rivers, Four Winds, and Kente. I'm really looking forward to that event. We are in the midst of preparing for the **Conference Annual Meeting** which will be held **April 27-29 in Napanee**. And we are preparing for the coming changes in our church structure, with the loss of presbyteries and fewer staff at the regional level. We need to learn how to do church in new ways. And you're already doing that – two congregations worshipping together. I encourage you all to think about how you can help build up or rebuild the church by joining in a network of people with a passion for mission of various kinds. The structure of the church does not make us who we are. It is the Spirit working within us and through us that makes us who we are.

Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Now it might take a little more than three days, but the Spirit of Christ is at work – through all of us! Thanks be to God – our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.