

Cracking Some Eggs
John 2:13-25
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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There's an old saying that no one is quite sure where it comes from. It may be an old French proverb: "If you want to make an omelet, you're going to have to crack some eggs." Sometimes making something involves breaking something else. As a baker who has broken a lot of eggs in his life, this got me thinking. What does cracking an egg do? It changes the potential of the egg, a potential that was not inherently good or evil, but was only focused on making another chicken. The cracked egg can be prepared a million ways, can be added to other ingredients to make even more. It can make tempura; it can make a cake; it can be used to grow and cure viruses and other diseases. But you have to crack the egg for any of those things to happen. Cracking an egg doesn't seem like that big of a deal, unless you're the egg. And then, it's world shattering, but also a new beginning.

Today we find Jesus doing something most of us remember hearing about at some point — throwing the money changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals out of the temple. But there is something different about John's telling of the story. Every other time this story appears in the other gospels, it is during holy week, just before Jesus is arrested. In fact, it's one of the things that really ticks off the religious leadership and makes them want to kill him. In the other gospels, it seems like a provocation. Immediately following his entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week, it has a clearly political message.

But not here. No, John remembers it differently, or wants us to. In the other gospels, Jesus only goes to Jerusalem two times, once as an infant or child and then to face death. But not so in John. In John, Jesus' truly public ministry starts right now, in his first independent action not driven by John the Baptist or his mother, who were the agents of action in the texts for the last two weeks. Besides, the miracle at Cana from last week, the water to wine — that was in a little nowhere town in the middle of the sticks. And if you remember, only the disciples and the water pourers are witnesses to that sign. They believe but no one else is mentioned.

But today Jesus travels with the disciples to Jerusalem for "The Passover of the Jews," which actually makes perfect sense. That is what Jews did for Passover in Jesus' day — made the pilgrimage to the temple. Why is it called "The Passover of the Jews?" Some have suggested, like the rest of today's text, John wants to remind us that he knows the rest of the story. And in the early days of Christianity, the crucifixion and resurrection were likely called "The Passover of Christ," since it, too, occurs during Passover. So for John, Jesus' public ministry begins and ends in Jerusalem. It begins and ends during Passover. It begins and ends with Jesus doing something that infuriates the leadership of the temple — today the moneychangers/sacrifice sellers and three years away, the raising of Lazarus.

John gets a bit more obvious with his bookends of this story. What exactly does Jesus do here? He takes a whip, and frees the doves, and he drives the cattle and more specifically the lambs (sheep is actually not the right word here; it should read lambs) out of the

temple with the whip. Hmmm — a lamb that is a captive of the temple and a whip. Would it surprise you that John uses the same word, "scourge," for whip that will be used to describe the whip that is used on Jesus by the Roman soldiers three years from now?

And then, John gets even MORE obvious. He has Jesus talk about the destruction of the temple, the dwelling place of God, and how it could be raised up in three days. The disciples have no idea what Jesus is talking about, but we do. We do because John isn't fond of subtlety, so he tells us that Jesus is talking about himself. He will be destroyed and be raised in three days, just like he says the temple can be — the dwelling place of God in both cases, destroyed and restored in three days.

So for John, Jesus' entire ministry begins and ends with our understanding of what is coming, and arguably with Jesus' understanding that he will die and be raised. Jesus and we, the reader, know the whole story already, and so we are invited to see the story as it unfolds differently.

Jesus is also aware that along the way, in order to make the new way — the new life, the new understanding of God's relationship with humanity — he's going to have to break a few eggs, even allowing himself to be broken, to be crucified, so he can be raised. Some expectations are going to have to be shattered; some things that have been around a long time that have been perpetuated for perfectly good reasons will have to be repurposed — given a new potential, given a new story — just like the egg that no longer becomes a chicken but becomes part of a rich sauce instead.

But all of this has to start somewhere. And Jesus chooses to have it start here with the sacrificial animals and the moneychangers. Notice that Jesus doesn't say one word that suggests there is anything dishonest about what people have done. He doesn't attack the IDEA of complying with Old Testament Levitical Law, which calls for sacrifice of perfect animals in the temple. He simply says; don't make my father's house into a marketplace.

As we've previously noted, a lot of interpreters are very quick to make the Gospel of John anti-Jewish. But it's worth noting again that John isn't attacking Judaism or God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. He's simply referring to the leaders of the people, the leaders of this oppressed people who are part of the Roman Empire. But if this isn't anti-Jewish, then what is it? Remember when the laws of Moses were handed down, there was no temple. There was only the tent of the tabernacle out there in the wilderness. But now things are different. The sacrifices are now much more ceremonial, much more public — particularly at festival times like this one. And there are even inspectors at the temple (according to Presbyterian pastor/scholar Nibs Stroupe), who, if people brought their animals from home to sacrifice would very often find blemishes in those animals necessitating buying one of the temple animals conveniently available for a not-so-small fee.

Even more troubling, some people can afford to sacrifice bulls and some can only afford to sacrifice turtle doves. So, after several centuries of temple practice, something that was never intended has snuck into the system — maybe intentionally and maybe not. The sacrificing was supposed to bring people back to God, to help them understand and seek

restored relationship by giving something up to honor their relationship with God. But now those same sacrifices are driving wedges among the people. That family can afford to sacrifice a bull. That family can only afford doves. Who is the better follower of God? Who is the most faithful, at least if we judge by this most public act of the religious community?

Jesus seems to understand that this is one egg that needs to be cracked; one thing that has always been done that needs to change. This is one thing they need to let go of. They need to get a better understanding of the God who now moves among them; they need to better understand their relationships with one another, and they need to make the place of worship not a place where the market forces intervene, but a place where the divine force, the way of Yahweh, holds sway.

It got me thinking about one of the things churches across the nation have had to do as a new year dawned, particularly in response to the horrifying Sutherland Springs Baptist church shooting in November. More than a few of my friends in ministry have reported receiving word from their congregants that groups of men in the congregation have agreed to start bringing their weapons to church in order to protect everyone. And I've previously mentioned that I've received numerous solicitations in the last two months for special t-shirts with bullet proof inserts to protect our male ushers and me in case of a similar attack. Sadly those marketing such things haven't developed inserts for women who might be in ministry, but that's a whole 'nother sermon...

We, like many churches, have a policy banning weapons from our buildings. Those weathered little signs at all of the main entrances are our legal way of saying; your concealed-carry weapon is not allowed here. Similarly, I will never wrap myself in bullet proof material to step into this pulpit. And, perhaps, that's because in our communal discernment, the Spirit has already cracked a few eggs here. After all, there is nothing inherently evil about a gun, as much as I'll admit I personally hate them. There's nothing evil about protecting me or our ushers from them. But when they enter a church, when they define how we go about being church, everyone's relationship changes. I'm grateful the spirit has broken us out of a view of security that otherwise would turn our church into a fortress.

I think Jesus' thinking was somehow the same. These sacrifices that were meant to deepen faith and connection of the worshipping community weren't doing that anymore. They were changing relationships among the people and with the experience of being a follower of Yahweh. And Jesus was about to show them a new way to seek restoration to God — through him.

And so he cracks some eggs. And the leadership is furious; and they will stay furious at Jesus for the entirety of his public ministry. They want to know under whose authority Jesus has done what he has done, failing to notice that Jesus has already told them. "Stop making my Father's house a market-place," he tells them and they can't or won't hear. He is no simple Rabbi; he is Son of God; he is Messiah.

And the scene is now fully set. The Messiah has come and he has some eggs to crack if he is to make this new world that is coming. He has some expectations to destroy, some

sacred cows to set free. People are going to feel mad, and threatened, and angry and confused. We can appreciate being mad, threatened, angry and confused, can't we? Ask the federal government worker who will stay home tomorrow, the working poor mother who just saw her deductibles double under her barely affordable ACA health insurance. Ask the transgender soldier who continues to serve despite an executive order barring them from service only due to a temporary federal restraining order. The pundits on the left and the right have been pontificating for the last 48 hours about the eggs that need cracking to fix this and everyone seems to have an opinion about them.

And some suggest that the 21st century church is, perhaps, in a similar boat. Things have got to change. We aren't the center of culture any more. We aren't powerful—not really. And for many, the church is no longer about being a place where people are drawn to seek God. It's become a place that divides, that condemns, that judges or that only cares about itself — more concerned with incubating the eggs we have in the hope of chickens that have not yet hatched, instead of being willing to risk cracking a few eggs to see what new recipes the Holy Spirit has in store for creating the feast of the people of God that the Church can be, must be, if we seek to be true to our calling, true to the message of the one who broke the world out of old ways of thinking and being, who brought love, grace and justice for all, not merely some...

Last week we celebrated the life of a famous egg cracker. This orator of the south was one who chastised pastors in Birmingham for silence in the racist south, who chastised supposedly liberal elected officials in the communities of the north, including this one, for fighting a poor man's war half way around the world and relegating the poor at home to underclass status and unsafe, inadequate housing. Dr. King surely cracked a few eggs in his quest for the peaceable kingdom that would feed the soul of all humankind.

The question for us is, can we commit to the slightly uncomfortable and hopefully life-giving, feast-making tasks that lie ahead for us in culture and church for a season, perhaps many-decades long, of reconsidering what has been? Can we commit to letting go of what does not give life, never counting our future chickens before they hatch, but instead being ever attentive, ever confidently following Christ, seeking new life, a new future for ourselves, for the communities around us, for the greater church, and perhaps especially for this corner of Christ's church in northwest Evanston?

If we are willing — surely we will have to be ready to let the spirit of Christ crack a few eggs, perhaps even us — may God make it so. Amen.