

## **“It’s Hard to be in the Lead”**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman  
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury  
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Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13-21

One needs to look long and hard for a passage as graphic as the one showing an angry Jesus at the cleansing of the temple scenario. This story usually is recorded at the end of Jesus’ ministry, as he enters Jerusalem for the last time, and you can, in part, understand why.

It comes (in that circumstance) at the end of his ministry, where no doubt he regularly faced all kinds of frustrations and disappointments. As a leader he would have been criticized, ridiculed, judged and dismissed. It is not easy work to try to impact the lives of a generation. In this cleansing of the moneychangers tables we can see frustration of a lifetime culminating in this one (un)holy act.

As the frustration boils over, he blows a gasket, so to speak, in his tirade against those who, on the pretense of serving temple visitors, actually exploited them by taking their money and charging exorbitant fees for the transactions to purchase birds or small animals to sacrifice after a pilgrimage to the temple.

It is understandable that Jesus would be frustrated. He set standards. He taught to be fair and just. And to see people who, after travelling miles and miles, days and days, in a pilgrimage to the temple, now faced exorbitant fees to offer the expected sacrifice inside. It just was not fair.

We all have had a similar experience in that we try to do what is right and get judged for it. A day of highway driving and being cut off or pinned between large trucks, we get frustrated by another person impatient that we are traveling too slow, even though we see our speedometer registers 108 km. in a 100 km. zone. Who is in the wrong here, anyway?

Or we hear about another company that supposedly gave away goods in a television promotion, two for one, yet actually charged such huge shipping

fees that they covered the shipping costs and the cost of the second item that we did not want in the first place. It makes us angry, and feeling used.

All of that must have been in Jesus' emotions that day as he came to Jerusalem, tired and worn.

But why does John have this cleansing at the beginning of Jesus' ministry? Now the gospels are not historic documents, in that they do not seek to offer a chronologically accurate story of Jesus' life. The very definition of a gospel is that it shares the good news that Jesus shared, and the sequence of events in his life are presented simply as a vehicle to put the stories and experiences shared into a narrative. That does not make the Bible false or inaccurate; it simply means that the New Testament is not as worried about the order of events as we might were we writing a historical rendering of Jesus' life today.

So why the stylistic decision to put the cleansing at the beginning of Jesus' ministry? Well, there is something else that Jesus faced that few of us face. When you are offering leadership and direction, you are open for criticism and judgment, even when it is not deserved or even relevant.

When a dug out underground room was located near the Rexall Tennis Centre at York University, speculation abounded as to what it was. Some thought it was a terrorist plot, as they moved toward the venue for the Pan American Games tennis this summer. Others thought it might be a place for hiding weapons and armaments.

A friend of mind said he was convinced it was built by Doug and Rob Ford, because they were always talking about subways.

You see, offering leadership means that you are the brunt of cheap shots and b-rate jokes, even when an event is not connected to you or related to what you have done in any way, shape or form.

Jesus must have taken a lot of that kind of criticism.

But he also wanted to set standards right from the start for his ministry. And so when he saw what to him seemed like completely unfair activity at the temple, he wanted others called to accountability in a way that he was often called to accountability.

It is difficult to be in the lead, and in the public eye. Everything one does is under scrutiny, and potentially judged.

It is important to set the standards you expect right up front. This Jesus did in his visit to the temple in John's gospel.

A community web site put out by the province speaks about three challenges in leadership – external, internal, and the challenge of leadership itself.

External challenges are the expectations of people, and the pressure to do this or that, depending on the individual seeking the leader's ear and mind.

Then there are the internal challenges: "Can I do the job?" "Do I have the stamina for all that is expected?" "Will I understand everything and learn what I need to know quickly enough?"

Then there are the challenges of leadership itself. People look to those in leadership to have a calm, healing, confident yet reserved approach to any issue. They may not always act like they support their leaders, but they expect the best of their leaders nonetheless. They want decisive leaders who also listen for advice and criticism. A tall order.

The story is told of a single mom who took over the role of chair of a school council. It was not a role she sought, or felt particularly called to do, yet she cared about the school, and knew that the activities of the school were important to her, her daughters, and her community.

There had been a lot of bickering on the council, with all kinds of accusations flung back and forth, and the former chair had neither the confidence of the council nor the trust of the administration of the school, a very difficult reality.

So she accepted the role, and at the first meeting the bickering, in-fighting, and bad-mouthing started all over again. She was accused of being weak and ineffective before the first piece of business was finished, and some on the council questioned her motives and commitment.

She knew this was not a career move or a stepping stone to further community or political activity. She also knew that if she acted like some of the council reps acted, chaos would reign. So she was determined to treat others with gentleness, civility, and respect. If she wanted a new attitude on the council among the members and within the meetings, she had to model that different approach.

And to her delight it worked. Oh, not at first, and certainly not immediately, but as people realized that no matter what was said or done, she would not tolerate the personal attacks (on her or others), then the meetings eventually did become more civil, and the members did listen more intently.

Our aboriginal sisters and brothers remind us that living with respect is part of who we are and who we must be. It was a moderator of our church, who also is aboriginal, The Very Rev. Stan Mackay, who brought before the church the change to our creed that added the words “to live with respect in creation.”

Jesus showed respect in what he did, and cheating worshipers who came on a pilgrimage to the temple had nothing to do with showing respect, and Jesus was angry.

May we have a determinations to live with respect among all we meet, and no matter how hard it is to be a leader, may we seek, and find, and support leaders who are willing to seek justice, love kindness, and live with respect for one and all.