

Cat Goodrich  
 First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL  
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Reach Out  
 John 2:13-22

Picture a busy park. It's a sunny day, and people are everywhere – walking their dogs, hanging out with friends, playing Frisbee, resting on benches. There are breakdancers with a boom box, a saxophone player, a couple arguing, a guy talking loudly on his cell phone. All of a sudden, it gets quiet – like someone has hit the mute button. The dancers are still turning flips, the sax player still acts like he's wailing on his instrument, the couple still gesticulates wildly. But no sound. Then, as if nothing has happened, the sound goes back on – and off – and on, and off again. The passersby who notice are confused, then they laugh, and point, and watch the performance. It's the work of a group called Improv Everywhere, a troupe of actors that create scenes to delight and amuse – they set up an orchestra in the middle of Times Square and let passersby take turns conducting. They put a fake portalet in the middle of a bank of toilets at a festival, and arranged for a mariachi band to pour out of it when the door is opened, then a gospel choir, then a marching band, then a troupe of Bollywood dancers. People are bewildered, and delighted to find themselves in the middle of ... something wonderful they don't quite understand.

Performance art is an experience, and for groups like Improv Everywhere, it's mostly innocuous. But performance art also is a way for artists to provoke and challenge. I'm thinking about the artist Dread Scott, one afternoon in Brooklyn spent 10 minutes walking into the spray from a fire hose. He videoed his experience and called it, "On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide" – walking into the water, hands raised in surrender, the artist evoked the demonstrations in 63 that happened just down the street in Linn Park, and connected it to the ongoing struggle against racism and racial profiling spurred on by the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others.

On Presidents Day, two weeks ago, a group of 17 young people lay down in front of the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue. They were joined by countless others as they lay there for three minutes, demonstrating just how quickly a troubled young man was able to kill seventeen of his classmates and wound countless others in Florida. The lie-in was intended to pressure the President to enact common sense gun reform. It was also a form of performance art.

I've been thinking about performance art because that's how one commentator described what Jesus was doing when he threw out the moneylenders and drove the animals out of the temple. And that description – performance art – changed how I read this passage. See, I've always read it as an affirmation of Jesus' humanity – Jesus got angry, lost his temper, turned over some tables. But what if instead Jesus had planned this event? What if he didn't lose his temper, but turned the market into chaos to strategically challenge the temple leaders and the Roman authorities during the busiest time of the year, the

Passover, to disrupt their system of profiting off the poor? What if this was political performance art? And if it was, what would that mean for us?

First I think we can still take some comfort in this story. They say that Jesus came to earth to experience the joy and the grief and the struggle and the fullness of all that life has to offer so that we can be confident that God knows the height and depth and breadth of the human experience, God knows us and God understands. So I hope you, like I, take comfort in knowing that in Christ, God, too has lived through the tail end of a capital campaign that took 65 years to complete! But don't worry folks, only two more weeks and the bell tower is going to be done...

This story of an angry Jesus turning over tables in the temple shows up in all four gospels. It humanizes the tender shepherd – adds the depth of righteous indignation to our picture of Jesus. What is he so angry about? Possibly the same thing that got Shannon Webster riled up about the payday lending place that used to be next door, until the church fought to shut it down. People in positions of power making money by taking advantage of people who are in need. A history lesson so we understand how this worked:

People travelled to Jerusalem to worship for Passover. Worship involved sacrificing an unblemished animal – which pretty much meant the animal had to be bought on arrival. Out of towners had to change money to the temple currency -- at an unfavorable rate -- then buy an animal to sacrifice -- at an inflated price. It's like buying a meal or a souvenir at the airport – you don't have much choice in the matter so they can charge you whatever they want. Jesus was angry because the temple moneylenders and merchants were trying to make a buck off the people who came to worship. By disrupting the lending and driving out the animals, Jesus throws the whole system into chaos. He challenges the corrupt institution, and by proxy, Rome. Rome appointed the chief priest, and received a portion of the tithes people offered there.

But that's not all that's going on here. One of the projects of John's gospel is to change people's thinking about where God could be found. In ancient Israel, God's presence among the people was located in the ark of the covenant, then the tabernacle, then the temple in Jerusalem. But when the temple was destroyed, their understanding about God's presence there had to change. In this exchange about the temple between Jesus and the religious leaders, we can see John foreshadowing Jesus's death and resurrection. But we also see Jesus calling himself the temple, saying that God's presence is made real in the world *in him*. In Christ, God is not hidden from the people, not acquiescent to Rome, but out amongst the people, let loose in the world, and angry about injustice—turning over tables in the marketplace and driving out the livestock and the lenders. Staging strategic and provocative performance art.

There is a lot to be angry about these days.

We don't have to look hard. On the back steps of the church, women are sleeping because First Light is full. There are more payday lenders in our city than there are

MacDonald's and Starbucks combined. Three weeks after the deadliest school shooting our country has ever seen, and no legislation has been passed, but don't worry, the president and the president of the NRA have had a "great meeting."

Yes, there's a lot to be angry about.

The father of community organizing, Saul Alinsky, said good organizers find the wounds of the people and rub salt in them – anger motivates. Anger gets us out in the street, crying out for justice, organizing for change.

But anger can be exhausting. Depleting. Defeating. It can't be all we have. And it isn't. We have this place. We have each other. We have faith in the one who Rome could crucify but could not kill, who brings us into relationship with the living God.

In this world where individual rights have primacy, we've built a community that cares for each other. In a world that values youth, we honor our elders and gather with young and old together. In a culture that is increasingly digitized and isolated, here we find real connection, relationship, and vulnerability. In a world where answers can be googled in two tenths of a second, here we find space to rest in the mystery and wonder of God. And in a country where funding for the arts and music is at risk, here we are in a community that supports local artists, that stewards beauty through worship, where we sing and are transported into God's presence through music, where we are invited to remember that we are precious and loved, that God delights in us. That is what we have here. God is not confined to our church, but I believe God can be found here.

Our session has discerned and is seeking to answer God's call to reach out – to engage with our neighborhood and our city in new ways, inviting new people into faith and sharing our conviction about God's love and justice far and wide. Because the lenders are still profiting from the poor. God's presence is still needed amongst the people. And we all need to be surprised by joy. I don't think we're going to be able to put a marching band in a port-a-potty. But we can embody our conviction that life is sacred, and schools need to be safe for our children by standing with the students who will march on March 24 to call for common sense gun control. In fact, the largest gun show in the Southeast is scheduled to take place at the BJCC the very same weekend, both events – the gun show and the march in Railroad Park not even a ten minute walk from our church in either direction. We can embody our belief that Christ calls us to be peacemakers, to be good Samaritans, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And if anyone wants to create some performance art to delight, or to strategically provoke and challenge – a flashmob, or a lie-in, or a marching band... let's talk.