

**Creator God, we want to feel your word resonating in our bones. To have it stuck in our heads like a melody, falling off our lips like a love song. So turn our hearts toward you now, just as you turned strangers into disciples. Turn our ears toward you, just as you turned tables in the temple. Amen.**

Jesus performs miracles and signs throughout the Gospels to show us that he is the son of God; like turning water into wine or healing the sick and feeding the hungry. While the story we heard this morning, the incident in the temple, is not a miracle story, it does depict Jesus giving a clear indication, or sign of sorts, of what God considers to be important and in so doing identifies himself as being from God.

Often sermons based on this moment in the temple focus on Jesus' anger, but I would like to look at a different aspect of the narrative. I'd like us to focus on the content found in the very last three verses of chapter 2; verses which, by the way, are not included in the assigned reading for the day. After his dramatic expression of righteous anger it says, in those last three verses, that "...the crowds were watching him closely; and many began to believe in Him because of the signs He was doing." And then it says "But, Jesus saw through to the heart of humankind, and He chose not to give them what they requested. He didn't need anyone to prove to Him the character of humanity. He knew what [they were] made of." The NRSV translation puts it this way: "...Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone, for he himself knew what was in everyone."

Here we find, not an angry Jesus, but a disappointed Jesus. And in this moment of sorrow and displeasure he decides not to put his trust in humankind. Because these verses are included right after the temple incident, I think they suggest that what Jesus saw in the people around him was something like greed, disrespect, and a demanding sense of entitlement.

Paul Piff, a social psychologist and research scientist at the University of California, Berkeley created a study of the science of greed using a rigged game of Monopoly where one player always had more money, more property and more options from the very beginning of the game. What he found, as he and his colleagues observed the subjects playing, was that Entitlement and self-interest became the primary motivation of those players who started with the most resources, and "as power and prestige increased, compassion and empathy decreased".

Ironically, Monopoly was originally created in 1903 by an anti-monopolist named Lizzie Magie who had hoped that the game would explain, and perhaps normalize, something called the single-tax theory. It was intended as an educational tool, to illustrate the negative aspects of concentrating land in private monopolies. When the rights to the game were bought out by Hasbro, the intent of the game changed drastically.

Now, we might not be greedy people all of the time, but once in a while we do want more than what we actually need. And quite often we don't pay attention to, or have any idea, about how our desire for more impacts others. You may have notice some interesting signs lining the hallway to the sanctuary as you entered today. These were signs held by members and friends of our own congregation at a rally yesterday in front of the State House in Augusta. A national movement called the **Poor People's Campaign** organized this gathering with the goal of highlighting the truth that "millions of poor people

in the United States today are poor because the wealth and resources of our country have been flowing to a small number of people, and federal programs are not meeting the growing needs of the poor.” We’ve been learning about this in our “Understanding Poverty” series. When subsidies are directed toward industries or individuals with higher incomes, it can lead to less funding for programs that benefit those in need, such as education, healthcare, and housing assistance. Humanity is very good at creating idols out of money and power and control to the detriment of the larger community.

Certainly, we do not live with such greed and entitlement-based behavior as our motivation normally, but might there be some place in us that can relate on some level?

American author Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about this struggle with overconsumption in a short story he called “The Great Carbuncle”. I had to look that word “carbuncle” up in the dictionary, because I of course immediately thought of infectious skin problems. It apparently can also refer to a variety of red precious stones. Hawthorne set his story in the heart of the White Mountains, where a jewel of incomparable beauty, said to shine with the radiance of a thousand suns was hidden. Eight bold adventurers, each with their own dreams and desires, set out to find this legendary gem, their hearts aflame with greed and ambition. Among them were a wise Doctor, who sought the stone's scientific marvels to enrich his name, and a cynical Seeker, who sought only to prove his doubters wrong, and a Poet, who sought to hide the Carbuncle's light keeping it to himself so it would illuminate his verses and likely make him famous. There was a Lord of a manor who wanted it to show off his great wealth, and a young newlywed couple who wished to light their home with its brilliant glow.

As they journeyed through the rugged terrain seeking the jewel, these travelers faced trials that tested their resolve and character, and tragedy struck almost all of them as their desires led them to ruin. The young couple, however, became lost along the way and in their wandering began to regret their decision to seek the stone. When they did finally stumble upon the jewel they were so overcome by its blaze that they determined it would overpower them if they were to take it to their home. They decided right then and there that they already had exactly what they needed. “The blessed sunshine, and the quiet moonlight, shall come through our window” they said to one another. “We will kindle the cheerful glow of our hearth, at eventide, and be happy in its light. But never again will we desire more light than all the world may share with us.” None but the couple survived the covetous quest for the Great Carbuncle.

Jesus saw into the heart of humankind and what he saw was disappointing. He saw a tendency toward profiting over and at the expense of others. He saw an attitude of audacious entitlement in those who insisted he give them signs. He saw a people that would mock him for not responding to violence with violence; would whip him for challenging their way of life, and would kill him for calling out their lack of compassion.

And yet he chose to love humanity in all of its beauty and all of its brokenness. He appealed to those who would listen, entreating them to acknowledge their blessings and share their gifts with those who had less. He called upon those same people to find room for friendship, trust, compassion and hearts in search of truth. The Divine present to us through the Spirit knows what we are made of; all of it, the good and the bad, and invites us to lean into our better selves. This is our calling, or as Rev. Dr. William Barber has said this is how “Each of us can use our passion and our purpose to live out God’s message in our world.” Amen.

**BENEDICTION**

Friends, if your seeking has led you here,  
if your weary heart followed breadcrumbs all the way to this sanctuary,  
then I have good news:  
you do not have to seek anymore.  
The table that we have share is God's Table.  
So if you came here looking for justice,  
then rest in the comfort that all can be fed here.  
If you came seeking beauty,  
then let your spirit marvel at the beauty of a community coming together.  
If you came seeking a brush with the Divine,  
then know that God is present and calls us to be about Holy Work. Amen.