

Welcoming a Disruptive God Kyle Douglas Potter

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B

John 2:13-23

Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, Milwaukee, Wis.

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.



In October 2014, a Chicago police officer killed a teenager named Laquan McDonald. The city of Chicago paid McDonald's family a \$50M settlement, and the police withheld the dash cam footage for over a year. When a journalist's lawsuit forced the police to hand over the footage, the prosecutor's office charged the officer with murder. The hidden footage also proved that six officers at the scene had joined the killer in lying about the events surrounding the shooting.¹ On Black Friday of that year, over a thousand protesters gathered along Chicago's Magnificent Mile.² For an entire day, men and women disrupted business in the city's most famous retail district, on the biggest shopping day of the year. The purpose of this non-violent occupation was to force wider public attention upon the city's attempted cover-up, and to demand civilian oversight of police practices. This economic disruption served to shift attention to wicked acts that had been hidden by the schemes of the powerful, or simply drowned out in the bustle of everyday life.

In today's Gospel text, we find Jesus staging a non-violent occupation as well.³ The Temple was Jerusalem's own Magnificent Mile, and served as both the economic and religious center for the people of Israel. This was where they met with God, and celebrated symbolic

¹ Nausheen Husain, "Laquan McDonald Timeline: The shooting, the video and the fallout," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 October 2017 [<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/laquanmcdonald/ct-graphics-laquan-mcdonald-officers-fired-timeline-htmlstory.html>]. Accessed 8 March 2018.

² Juan Perez Jr., Grace Wong, Kate Thayer, Lolly Bowean and Jeff Coen, "Crowds close stores, march on Mag Mile to protest Laquan McDonald killing," *Chicago Tribune*, 27 November 2015 [<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-laquan-mcdonald-black-friday-protest-met-20151127-story.html>]. Accessed 8 March 2018.

³For a treatment of this point, see Andy Alexis-Baker, "Violence, Nonviolence and the Temple Incident in John 2:13-15." *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012): 73-96.

fellowship meals with him in the form of sacrifices. According to the Torah, those meals expressed gratitude, covered sins, and renewed the promises that God and Israel had made to one another. For the Temple to serve its purpose, animals needed to be traded in its vicinity, and foreign money had to be changed. That's why this momentary disruption in the economy disrupted the nation's engagement with God. In a symbolic way, the life of the entire nation was disrupted, for this small space of time.⁴

This is almost certainly the event that got Jesus killed. So why did he do it? It might have been that this trading had taken over the part of the temple called the "court of the gentiles." What was intended as a space for outsiders to draw nearer to Israel's God had been repurposed for the needs of the insiders. That concern would place Jesus in line with the Hebrew Bible's prophetic critique of Israel's calling. John's Gospel won't let us overlook the theological meaning of the action, however. Jesus' act of disruption shifts everyone's attention to himself. He tells them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days" (John 2:19). What does his body have to do with the Temple? Under the covenants with Moses and David, the temple was the place of encounter with God. In the new covenant that Jesus establishes between God and God's people, it is Jesus who mediates encounter with God. Jesus disrupts the status quo and occupies the temple to call attention to an important but hidden reality: that he will show everyone who the Father is.

Jesus did not finish his ministry of disruption and occupation with his Temple protest. The crucified and risen Jesus disrupts and occupies our own lives, guiding us from judgment to mercy. I don't know why you're here, but I come to church for the drama.

Just like the ancient Israelites in their temple, we celebrate the Mass as a fellowship meal with our God. "Christ is the host, and we are his guests."⁵ In our liturgy, we call ourselves sinners. We name our need for forgiveness. In that ritual, we learn to put aside our excuses and our justification. For just a few moments of silence, we try to narrate our lives to God not as we wish we were, but as we really seem to be. We think of the broken places in our lives. We might recall the ways in which we're confused and exasperated in our work and in our relationships. We might think of the moments in which we've committed gossip, been dishonest, or compromised our integrity. The liturgy disrupts our pride. And we hear the good news that the God of Jesus Christ loves and forgives sinners.

⁴ See Raymond Edward Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII. The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 29 (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁵ Anglican Church of Kenya, "Service of Holy Communion," *Our Modern Services* (Carrollton, Tx: Ekklesia Society, 2008), 82.

Now, for many of us, that moment in the general confession is not only time that we think of our sins and shortcomings. Some of us carry a great deal of guilt, and we can be a bit fuzzy on what we are responsible for, and what we are not. We think of broken friendships, or the way we've let someone down, sometimes for years afterward. Some of us live with depression or anxiety. Some of us struggle with addiction. Some of us can always hear that entrancing whisper, "Are you sure it's not all your fault? How can anyone believe what you say?"

Jesus disrupts this ugly self-talk. Jesus disrupts the voice of the Evil One. He disrupts our rehearsals of recrimination and fear, and calls us to the table of God to renew the covenant. In the sacrament of his Body and Blood, he renews his promise to bring you to completion. He renews the promise of your baptism. In this bread and this wine, the Incarnate God feeds you with himself. Your baptism means that before you are anything else, you are God's and you are loved. For anyone within the sound of my voice, know that before you are anything else, you are loved by God. At this Mass, the Word who became flesh disrupts our lies and occupies our souls with this truth. Here at this Holy Communion, he offers himself entirely. This is our sign that the God of Jesus Christ loves us with all of our virtues and all of our failures. This sacrament of his Body and Blood is an effectual sign⁶ that God forgives sinners, and loves them beyond any "boundary, limit, or breaking point."⁷ The Lord disrupts any voices that claim otherwise, and calls out to us: "Come to me, all who labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). If you're longing for just that kind of disruption - if you need Jesus to overturn the tables of self-hatred or blame or addiction - there's healing here for you.

We opened ourselves to the Lord's disruption and occupation when we came to Mass. Now how can we respond? How can we welcome this disruption that makes us whole? I have a small suggestion. As you approach the table, practice this mental prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, I belong to you." As you breathe in, "Lord Jesus Christ." As you breathe out, "I belong to

⁶ According to the Catechism of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, "the sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace" (857). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* uses the phrase "efficacious signs" (para. 1131). This terminology for the meaning of a sacrament is standard in the Western church and originates from St. Augustine of Hippo.

⁷ The God of Jesus Christ "loves you as you are, not as you should be. He loves you behind fidelity and infidelity, beyond worthiness and unworthiness. He loves you in the morning sun and the evening rain. He loves you equally in your state of grace and in your state of disgrace. He loves you without caution, regret, boundary, limit, breaking point." Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Multnomah Press, 2005) 240-241.

you.”⁸ Lord Jesus Christ, I belong to you. It’s not a promise you’re making. All we can really promise is “I’m here.” I’m here with my doubts and my hopes and my struggle. Lord Jesus Christ, I belong to you. It’s the truth of your baptism, and the Lord declares it again in this mystical supper. That is the meaning of this gift of divine presence in the Blessed Sacrament. We have been claimed by a disruptive God. Lord Jesus Christ, we belong to you.

Amen.



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⁸ This is a modification of the famous “Jesus Prayer,” which comes from a contemplative prayer tradition called Hesychasm. For an introduction, see *The Way of a Pilgrim; and, A Pilgrim Continues His Way*. Trans. Helen Bacovcin (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2003).