

Consensus

Volume 36

Issue 1 *History of the Lutheran Theological Seminary
in Saskatoon*

Article 9

5-25-2015

Sermon at Keffer Chapel Open Door Worship

Hilla Lahtinen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

 Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lahtinen, Hilla (2015) "Sermon at Keffer Chapel Open Door Worship," *Consensus*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol36/iss1/9>

This Sermons is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Sermon at Keffer Chapel Open Door Worship

Hilla Lahtinen¹

Text: John 2: 13-22

Terrorism, in Canadian Criminal law, is defined as an act of religious or ideological purpose that causes serious harm, and is intended to intimidate the public or compel a person, organization, or government to behave in a desired way. This could include things such as causing death or severe injury, endangering life, causing substantial property damage, or causing serious interference or disruption to public order.

So, was Jesus someone we would nowadays describe as a terrorist? Of course, the term was not in use back then – but what if his outbreak of rage at the Temple took place today? What kind of a box would we put him in, legally?

This word, terrorism, occupies a lot of media space today. I don't remember the last time I read the news and did not immediately encounter a story about a terror attack or the threat of one somewhere in the world. It seems that religious extremism, whether it happens in the Christian, Islamic, or Jewish context, is a major concern these days. Organizations such as ISIS and Boko Haram have overtaken our smart phones, laptops and wide-screen TV's with videos of executions and otherwise unspeakable violence. And for some reason, we watch on – unable to turn away, yet also repulsed by what we see. Of course it is terrifying! Of course it is wrong! But it's also convenient for us Westerners to deny any part in causing such suffering when we can so easily point a finger at a group of religious fanatics somewhere else in the world. It's easy for us to think that it isn't essentially our problem – at least as long as we can stay one step ahead of any threat to our national security.

But then, of course, there is the other side of things – we take more than our share of natural resources, we support businesses and corporations that oppress others across the world. Our sins are removed from our eyes – yet they are very real for the people we don't see. People suffer because of our actions. And when people suffer, they also rise up, in the name of religion or in the name of ideology. And this is what we call extremism. In addition, when we concentrate on discussing things that these “extremists” and “religious fanatics” do in other parts of the world, it becomes easier for us to ignore some of the problems that are very real in our own society. For example, how is it possible that hundreds upon hundreds of aboriginal women are going missing in our communities right here in Canada. Why isn't the media all over that news?

It is so easy to simplify matters – to make them black and white. When things are simple, we don't really need to think about the full texture and depth of the situation. And I think that this simplistic thinking has too often been applied to the scripture reading we heard today. Some say that this story about Jesus' anger at the Temple is a call for us to “let it all out” – they claim that somehow an uncontrollable display of anger and rage is normal and healing, and will eventually lead to well-being. And maybe some advocates of scream

¹ Hilla Lahtinen is a Master of Divinity Student at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo.

therapy would agree with this view. But then there is another view, a very dangerous one, which has gained all too much support throughout the history of Christianity. And that is the view which proposes that Jesus was trying to make a point about the Jews being an altogether corrupt bunch of people – that they had it all wrong, all of the time. This view situates Jesus in opposition to the Jews – not as one of them. And we all know what kind of terrifying situations this kind of thinking has led to throughout the course of history when it comes to the way in which Jews have been treated by Christians and sometimes also by other faith traditions.

A couple of months ago, in the aftermath of the violence in Paris that took place as a response to the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad published by Charlie Hebdo, I read a newspaper article in which representatives of religious organizations were interviewed on their views on the attacks. Of course, every representative condemned any kind of use of violence, but in addition, they offered some really insightful remarksⁱ. I was especially interested in what the Jewish Rabbi had to say about his tradition's response to the shootings. He talked about how Judaism is essentially and primarily a self-examining context; he pointed out that there is plenty of criticism, irony, and even sarcasm found within its boundaries. Freedom of speech has always been an absolutely crucial element of Judaism: for example, the entire literature of the Talmud is filled with the many and sometimes opposing views of the Rabbis. Sometimes these views can be rather radical and even extreme, but the point is that there is always room for discussion. Now, while such discussion is well tolerated, and even welcomed when it takes place within the tradition, it is a bit more difficult to handle when the criticism comes from the outside. For the Rabbi, it was important that dirty laundry should be washed at home – not taken out to the public. And I tend to wholeheartedly agree with him. We need to be able to be very critical and honest of the practices of our own traditions – after all, what would be the point of such traditions if they were to lose their core values.

When pondering the Rabbi's words, I was reminded of the saying, "That which is to give light must endure burning."ⁱⁱ So, if our traditions and communities are to be sources of light, they must also be able to endure burning – often from within. And maybe this is something we need to take into account when we think about terrorism, and as we ponder our Gospel reading today. You see, when Jesus showed up at the Temple on that day he was being surrounded by his own people – he was a Jew amidst hundreds of other Jews. This was his tradition – his spiritual and contextual home. And he didn't simply lash out in anger as soon as he got there. He saw what was happening, he gathered pieces of rope, sat down and calmly braided the pieces of rope into a whip, and then rose up in anger. If we want to stick with legal definitions, maybe we could add the title of *premeditated* disturbance of public order to his list of offences. But Jesus had been to the Temple many times before – he knew the rituals, he knew the drill with the moneychangers and sacrifices – they were long-standing traditions outlined in the instruction of the Torah. So why was this time different? Why get angry now?

Daniel Maoz, a scholar who is quite well-known to the seminary community, and who has done extensive research on the building developments of Jerusalem under the rule of the Roman Empire, is rather convinced that Jesus' outbreak at the Temple comes at a time when Herod was in the midst of completing a major building project by extending the Temple platform southward by the equivalent of six football fields. Herod wanted to be known throughout history as a kind of an architectural genius and this was one of his

favourite projects – and an extremely ambitious one at that. This kind of a project would have required massive amounts of materials and workers, and therefore it must have been a very expensive piece of work to undertake. Maoz has proposed that much of the money required for this particular project would have been directly collected from the business transactions already taking place at the Temple. The Jews would have been forced, by Herod, to up their fees, so that the building project could continue. If we are to follow this logic, then Jesus' outrage isn't at all directed to the rituals and sacrifices of the Temple, but rather it is a lament against the injustice and oppression directed at his people – perhaps Jesus was crying out because the power of Rome had now taken over the Temple as well. Herod was making the Jews his pawns in a game for boosting his own legacy. And if this really is the case, then it is interesting to think about what Jesus might have meant when he said: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."ⁱⁱⁱ Maybe he was making a point about *not* mixing the two.

Perhaps we'll never know exactly what took place at the Temple that day, and perhaps we don't really even need to know. What I think might be the most important thing to learn from this story, is that we are all called to look at our own communities and traditions with a critical eye. We are to observe and to listen carefully to the circles in which we move, to make sure that shifting power dynamics and politics aren't beginning to corrupt our practices and purpose. We are always called to speak out against injustice and oppression, whether it comes from the outside or from within.

Today we've heard beautiful choral works either composed by women, written for women, or sung by women – these women have used their gifts and voices to speak up against a musical patriarchy that has lasted for centuries. They have not simply gotten up in anger, but have used their abilities to create or perform something moving – something that is filled with the spirit of the Divine - something that speaks to people and will hopefully keep us more honest as a society. We each have a voice, as well as calling; we are encouraged to embrace the goodness and beauty of our own traditions and communities, while also keeping a keen eye on what is shaping and changing them. And sure, it is always easier to recognize the stains in someone else's laundry pile – but perhaps that is theirs to sort out.

And as for whether Jesus was a terrorist. I'll let you decide for yourself. For me, he was definitely a radical, maybe even a revolutionary – but staying true to his own tradition, he was not afraid to point out the problems within his own context. He did so fearlessly and freely. And so, I am not trying to encourage any one of you to go out and riot (unless you have a really good reason to do so), but I do think that we need to take seriously our responsibility to keep an eye on things within our context. God calls us to this task and fills us with the creativity of the spirit – now it's our turn to say: Yes – I'll go. And perhaps then our burning communities and traditions will become sources of light for the whole world. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Harju, Jukka (2015, January 08). Neljän uskonnon puheenvuorot Pariisin terrori-iskusta. *Helsingin Sanomat*. Retrieved from www.hs.fi. Freely translated by Hilla Lahtinen.

-
- ⁱⁱ Wildgas, Anton, "Helldunkle Stundle" *Mittag: Neue Gedichte* (Leipzig, Germany: L. Staackman Verlag, 1917), p. 90.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 12: 17