

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee Florida
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John 2:13-22 (NRSV)

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. [14] In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

[15] Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

[16] He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" [17] His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

[18] The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" [19] Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." [20] The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" [21] But he was speaking of the temple of his body. [22] After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

JESUS CAME TO CLEAN HOUSE

What is your image of Jesus? When I call his name what picture comes to your mind? For me it is the image of the Good Shepherd. You know the portrait I'm talking about; it is the one where Jesus is gently holding the little sheep that was lost and found. That's a good image for us to have of Jesus. Jesus was a compassionate person who sought out those who needed help.

I've been using a Brief Statement of Faith as the basis for my confirmation class, and that is certainly the image of Jesus painted in that confession. Jesus is described as one who preached good news to the poor and release to the captives. He blessed the children, healed the sick, bound up the brokenhearted and forgave sinners.

That's all true. But, it seems to me that our descriptions of Jesus often leave out one of the most important things that Jesus came to do.

Jesus came to clean house. Jesus came to replace false religion with true faith. Jesus came to shake things up. In addition to being a Good Shepherd, Jesus was also a fiery prophet. He got angry at injustice, and he made people angry with his prophetic statements about what needed to change.

This is the Jesus that we don't want to talk about. We are afraid of this Jesus because just as he overturned the tables of the money changers and drove the animals out of the Temple, so the Spirit of Christ confronts our shallow and faithless way. Jesus can be a disruptive force in our life; Jesus brings change, and many of us don't want to change.

THEOLOGICAL ORDER

The cleansing of the Temple is a pivotal story in the life of Jesus. And the cleansing of the Temple teaches a big lesson to those of us who would be his disciples.

Those of you who have studied the Bible know that in the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the cleansing of the Temple is placed at the end of the story.

In fact this prophetic act by Jesus is seen as the straw that broke the camel's back; this challenge to the authority and especially the pocketbook of the religious leaders caused them to take action against Jesus. In large part, they crucified Jesus because in their minds he spoke against the Temple, and for them God and the Temple in which He resided were one.

You'll remember that at the trial of Jesus, they even mentioned the fact that Jesus talked about tearing down the Temple and rebuilding it in three days. Even the mention of such a thing sent those religious leaders into a tizzy.

I think Matthew, Mark and Luke have it right when it comes to chronological order. The cleansing of the Temple did occur at the end of Jesus life. His

actions and comments in the Temple probably did lead the religious leaders to seek his crucifixion.

But, I think John has it right also. I think that John puts this story at the beginning of his gospel because John is not so interested about chronological order. John is interested in theological order.

John doesn't write these things about Jesus so that we can have an orderly historical account but so that we might believe in Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

John doesn't tell us everything; John tells us the things we need to know to have faith in Jesus.

BAPTISM OF FIRE

And John tells us this from the very beginning,
“If you want to follow Jesus, it's going to be a rocky road. Jesus is not going to confirm the old ways of worshipping and the old ways of doing business.

Jesus will not let you stay in your comfort zone. In fact Jesus will turn things upside down and inside out. John the Baptist had it right. John baptized with water, but Jesus would baptize with fire.”

I like the way Annie Dillard wrote about this challenging and prophetic Jesus.

She wrote,
“Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?”

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up batches of TNT to kill the Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets.

Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews for the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

This might be a pivotal story in the gospel, but many of us feel uncomfortable with this story. We don't like the image of Jesus disturbing the business of the money changers and driving the animals out of the Temple courtyards. We prefer a Jesus who is meek and mild and manageable.

But, this is certainly not the picture of Jesus that is presented in our lesson for today. When the Temple was polluted by the irreverence of buying and selling, Jesus rose up and cast the offenders out of the Temple. I imagine a wild scene that day as they money lenders scrambled to pick up their coins and the shepherds ran to recover their livestock.

Things were out of control in the Temple that day. It was no more business as usual.

CLEANSING OUR TEMPLE

And we need to remember that the Spirit of Christ is no more manageable today than he was long ago when He cleansed the Temple. I'm not sure what Christ might throw out of our sanctuary, but I can guarantee this; there would be something. We are no different than those who have gone before us. We too have things in our churches and our lives that need to go.

There was an old rock and roll song that talked about putting “your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters.” And the song continued by describing why we need to put our hand in Jesus' hand. Referring to our lesson for today, the songwriter said, “the buyers and the sellers were no different fellers that what I pretend to be.”

I think that's true. We're just like those who changed the money and sold the animals in the courtyard long ago. We often put financial and material needs above our spiritual needs. Like Esau from the Old Testament, we sell our soul for the pleasure of the moment. We have turned the dark mysterious temple into the neighborhood religious supermarket.

And that's the reason we need Jesus, the disturbing and zealous Jesus presented in our gospel lesson for today. . Luther once prayed, "Ah God, punish us, we pray Thee, but be not silent toward us."

We don't need Jesus to coddle us in our idolatrous and death dealing ways. We need Jesus to judge us. We need Jesus to get angry with us and drive out those things in our life that prevent us from worshipping God as we should.

THE ALMIGHTY DOLLAR

And the number one thing that prevents us from worshipping God as we should is the fact that our lives are filled with the noise and distraction of the marketplace. The "almighty dollar" is still the "god" in whom many of us trust, and that prevents us from really hearing what God has to tell us.

Several years ago a minister from South America visited the church I served in Virginia. He said that he felt sorry for me and all of us who are pastors in the United States.

Now that remark was totally unexpected. I always thought of us as the ones who were lucky, being able to serve in country like ours.

But, he went on to explain what he meant in way that made a lot of sense. He said that because we have so much in this country, it is easy for us to become distracted by material things and not pay enough attention to spiritual things.

I would be hard pressed to disagree with him.

CLEANING HOUSE

I recently had yet another yard sale. Every time we have one I think, "Why in the world did we buy all this stuff? We are literally drowning in junk." I am so happy to get rid of those things that I was so anxious to buy just a few short years ago.

And yet what will I do in just a few months? I will go out and find new baubles to replace the ones I just got rid of. We human beings are such silly creatures sometimes. But, our silliness belies a deeper, spiritual problem.

We are trying to fill a spiritual need with material goods, with things that do not satisfy.

God loves us too much to let us remain in our state of disarray. He has sent us Jesus to help us clean house, to judge those things that need to be judged, to get rid of those things that have no place in our lives.

There is actually a show on TV now called “Clean House.” It’s a show about people who have a most unusual occupation. They are called professional organizers, and their job is to help messy people get the junk out of their lives. You would be amazed what people save and how reluctant they are to part with even the smallest item.

But, the before and after photos of their home are dramatic and illustrate the usefulness of this service. When people get the clutter out of their lives, they can operate more efficiently and see what is most important.

In a much greater way, Jesus is like a professional organizer for our life. He helps us part with things that we should have pitched long ago, and he helps us focus on what is really important.

It’s not always easy when Jesus comes to our house. We are pretty attached to things that we have been accumulating. But, giving up some things has a way of freeing us up. “Cleaning house” can be a good thing.

The season of Lent is about Jesus coming to cleanse our lives just as he cleansed the Temple long ago. Lent is about our spiritual spring cleaning. Lent is about letting go of things in order to let God into our lives.

THE TRUE TEMPLE

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day misunderstood when he talked about destroying the temple and in three days raising it up again. Jesus wasn’t speaking about a building. Jesus was speaking metaphorically about his own death and resurrection.

You see the temple of God was not where the people thought it was. It wasn’t this magnificent building that had taken forty six years to build. God

was not present in that impressive edifice. In fact, God had left that building because the Temple's sacrificial system had become a way to exploit the poor instead of a way to worship God.

I read this week that a poor pilgrim coming to Jerusalem for Passover might have to pay the equivalent of two or three months wages in order to buy the sacrifice needed and pay the temple tax. Instead of helping God's people the Temple had become a means of exploiting God's people. The Temple had become big business.

No wonder God told his people through the prophet that their ritual sacrifices made him sick to his stomach. According to the prophet, the sacrifice that God really wanted was a people who would "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God." (Micah 6:8)

And that was exactly the message that God brought his people in Christ. God was present in the man Jesus. Jesus was the temple of God's Spirit.

THE CHURCH IS NOT A BUILDING

But, the people misunderstood.

They were looking for God in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. And that's still the case for many of us.

We talk about the church, and we mean a building.

But, the church is not a building.

The church is a human presence in which the divine resides. The church is the Body of Christ, the people of God who have been called to be a holy temple. We are a special people. We have been called according to God's purpose and our job is not rearranging the furniture in a building or making liturgical sacrifices each week.

Our job is to serve others in the name of Christ. Our job is open ourselves up to the filling and leading of the Spirit, God's Spirit.

One commentator described the process in this way. He wrote,

“We do not stand, in Lent, before the mirror of our own moral introspection. That would be an easy thing. We stand before a righteous, demanding accusing God. His standards are not our own.

His demands intrude upon our easy complacency, overturning tables, setting wild birds loose, and clanging coins on stone floors. His presence is a sting of the whip upon the neck. He barges in here and drives us out of our burrows of religious seclusion.”

A minister told of going to a dedication service for a beautiful building at the University of Oklahoma. It had a tall tower, great facilities, and all kinds of marvelous things. The young campus minister had a very brief prayer at that august occasion. He prayed,

“Lord, burn down this building and scatter these people for the sake of the gospel.”

The minister didn’t say how long the young chaplain was able to stay at the university.

I suspect it wasn’t very long.

LOVING GOD, LOVING NEIGHBOR

People don’t like to hear the truth about their big buildings and elaborate cathedrals. But, we need to hear that truth. We need to remember the words of Jesus when he cleansed the temple.

“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house into a marketplace!”

You see, it’s not about having the prettiest church building in town. It’s not about being a success financially or programmatically. If that’s what we think, maybe it would be better to lose all those things, to have our building torn down so that we could focus on what is really important.

And what is really important? The Bible tells us that the most important thing in the world is to love God with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

In Jesus we have a living portrait of what that means.
In Jesus we can see what God is really like.
And in Jesus we see what it means to be truly human.

Jesus is the temple.
Jesus is the example.
Jesus is the judge of all that we say and do.

I wonder. What is it in our life that needs to go? What would Jesus drive out so that we could worship him in Spirit and truth?

May God open us up to the gracious judgment that comes our way in Jesus.
May God help us with much needed spring cleaning.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN