

Cleansing the Temple John 2:12-25

It all started as something good, something from the Law of Moses. After describing in detail all the objects that were involved in Old Testament worship, from the Ark of the Covenant to the bronze altar of sacrifice, God told Moses that all of God's people were to pay a half-shekel every year, rich and poor alike, and that this money was to be used to support the worship carried out at the Tent of Meeting (Ex 30:11-16). In Jesus' time this same tax was collected, and used to support the worship in the Temple.

But here's the catch. Each person had to pay the tax in a half-shekel coin. But this type of coin wasn't used by most countries, including most of the places where the people of God lived in Jesus' time, scattered as they were throughout the Roman Empire. That meant that people coming from faraway places had to exchange their money, in much the same way that you do when travelling to foreign lands today. And doesn't exchanging money require money changers? So why would Jesus get so upset at people who were performing a necessary function?

Moreover, when people came to the Temple to worship in those days, they always brought animals to sacrifice. But what if the people had travelled a long way to Jerusalem? It just wasn't practical for them to have brought their animals all the way, for example, from Rome. Well, the Law of Moses made a specific allowance for just such a situation. It says that worshippers could sell their own offerings for money and bring the money to the place where God's people worshipped. They could then buy new animals to offer to the Lord. So why would Jesus be so upset with the people who provided these necessary animals for sale?

Oh, and the particular feast described in today's passage was the Passover, celebrated by the people of God since the day they were delivered from the land of Egypt. On that day, Moses had told them that every family should sacrifice and eat a lamb during this feast. Of course, by the time of Jesus, the religious leaders had established a rule that the only lambs that could be used in this ritual were those raised in Bethlehem, just a few miles down the road, and of course they had to be purchased in Jerusalem.

So, really, what was the big deal? Why was Jesus so concerned if folks set up shop in the Temple to provide the goods and services without which the worship of God wouldn't be possible anyway? What's wrong with convenience? You might even consider what these folks were doing as a public service!

Perhaps the problem was with the way that the moneychangers would routinely charge very high fees for exchanging their money. Perhaps the problem was the way the sellers of animals would jack up their prices, taking advantage of people who came from far away and had no other option but to buy from them – think about the prices you pay for food and drink in an amusement park, for example. Jesus seems to have been especially indignant at those who sold doves – the offerings that were brought by the poorest people, because they are the ones to whom His words in verse 16 are specifically addressed.

But the strange thing is that Jesus doesn't mention the price gouging or the cheating that doubtless went on. Now, to be sure, He would make those criticisms at the second time He cleared out the temple at the end of his ministry. But at this first cleansing of the Temple, His concern seems to have been broader. In today's passage He objects to the mere fact that the Temple had become a marketplace. He condemns the practice of buying and selling within the Temple complex in general, not the way that the buying and selling was done.

The problem thus was that instead of people coming into the Temple to focus on God in prayer, to draw close to God in confession and repentance and to meditate on His grace and forgiveness through the object lessons of the sacrificial system, everyone was focusing on the things of this world – on how much money they could save or on how much money they could make. The problem, at root, seems to have been one of focus.

Okay, so what about us modern Christians? We don't offer any of these animal sacrifices anymore. In fact, we know from our responsive reading what Peter said – that all of us Christians are like living stones, built up into a spiritual house, a dwelling of the Holy Spirit. We know that the true temple of God isn't a building – it's all believers throughout space and time. But is our focus in worship always where it should be?

Think about those TV preachers, for example. You know, the “send me your money and God will bless you” types. Surely their focus is just as much on the things of this world as those money changers who did business in the Temple. You might say they are even worse, since these modern “health and wealth” preachers are peddling their prosperity gospel in the name of Jesus.

Now, we Presbyterians would never preach like that. But what about those “liberation theologians” taught about in our seminaries, those people so busy trying to apply Marxist principles to human society? Sure it's important to help the poor, but where is their focus – on changing this world, or on bringing people to Christ? On the other hand, why have so many Presbyterians been spending so much time and money wrangling about church property lately? Are they any more focused on the things of God than were those merchants selling doves?

Let's get a little closer to home. We all know it takes a lot of time and money to keep up our beautiful buildings, just as it took all those taxes to maintain the Temple in Jesus' time. But where is our focus – on gaining more members and more donations to help us do that, or on expanding the kingdom of God? Where is our focus – on making sure that the heater works, or on encouraging the fire of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and in the hearts of others?

Let's look at what Jesus did in another way. So passionate was He for the purity of the worship of God that His disciples recognized in Him the words spoken by David 1000 years before: zeal for the house of God consumed Him. He would not tolerate anyone or anything distracting people from the true meaning, the true business of the Temple – the worship of God. He would not sit still and allow anything to remain in the Temple that didn't belong there.

Okay, so we know that we New Testament Christians, all of us put together, make up the new Temple. We know that all Christians are called to be a holy nation, a royal priesthood, offering up spiritual sacrifices to God. So, how diligent are we in cleansing our temple of

impurity? Sure, we grouse about the General Assembly's unwillingness to discipline presbyteries that flout our denomination's ordination standards. But do we tolerate sin in our presbytery? Do we speak the truth in love to people in our own congregation, confronting people still blinded to their own sin? Do we confess our transgressions to each other, or do we overlook or rationalize away the sin in our own lives? Are we so confident in the grace of God that we take advantage of it?

Maybe that's why the religious leaders of Jesus' day responded to Him the way they did. Maybe that's why there was no indignation, no outrage expressed at Jesus' actions. Perhaps it was because they couldn't deny that He was doing what they should have been doing all along. Maybe that's why the best response they could come up with was something along the lines of, "Who authorized you to clean up this mess?" Since Jesus was acting like a prophet, they expected Him to be able to demonstrate some divine power.

Or perhaps the leaders had such a tepid response because they had one eye on the crowds of people who were obviously enjoying the comeuppance that those who had been swindling them were now receiving. No, the leaders couldn't come down hard on Jesus because there could be no doubt that cleansing the Temple was one of the most popular things Jesus ever did. It's no wonder that verse 23 says many of the people in Jerusalem believed in Him.

But how did Jesus justify His actions? What was the sign that He showed to the people and the leaders alike? It turned out to be a sign that neither of them really understood. In fact, it was a sign that pointed to the way that Jesus would eventually lose that popularity. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Build a temple in three days? It was ridiculous. According to this passage, it had taken Herod the Great 46 years to construct all the courts and outbuildings that surrounded and adorned the Temple of God, all the courtyards from which Jesus had expelled the moneychangers. With all his power and wealth, it had taken King Solomon seven years to build the first temple. How could one man, even a great king, possibly hope to do the job in only 3 days? Who was this Jesus? What kind of authority did He really claim?

Jesus' answer, His sign, thus did a very effective job of challenging what people really thought about Him. No wonder-working prophet could possibly build a temple in three days. No divinely anointed king could either. In some way, by giving this sign, Jesus was claiming to be someone greater still – someone divine.

And it was that claim, after all, that would eventually lead to His death. The religious leaders would not, could not tolerate a prophet who claimed to be the Son of God. And the crowds would not follow a Messiah who refused to be an earthly king like David, a king who refused to drive out the Romans from Jerusalem as He had driven out the moneychangers from the Temple.

Yes, on the day described in this passage, Jesus would fulfill verse 9 of Psalm 69, as His zeal for the House of the Lord would eat Him up. But on the day of His crucifixion, on the day that both the religious leaders and the people would turn on Him, He would live out other words of that Psalm:

“Those who hate me without a cause
Are more than the hairs of my head;
They are mighty who would destroy me,
Being my enemies wrongfully.”

In his death, Jesus would unite both the religious leaders and the people against Him. As David said so many years earlier: “Those who sit in the gate,” the leaders, “speak against me. And I am the song of the drunkards,” the lowest people of society. And Psalm 69 would even predict some of the horrible details of the crucifixion:

“I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none;
And for comforters, but I found none.
They also gave me gall for my food,
And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”

No it's no wonder that at the end of this passage, Jesus didn't let the praises of the crowd turn His head. He knew what people were really like, how fickle we are, how self-centered and self-interested. Jesus knew what would happen at the cross.

But Jesus also knew that wasn't the end of the story. For He wasn't, after all, talking about the destruction and the rebuilding of the magnificent buildings which He had just cleansed. No, when He said that He would raise up the Temple in three days after it was destroyed, He was talking about His own body. Jesus was predicting that He would arise from the grave on the third day after His crucifixion. His disciples remembered this sign after He rose from the dead. They would remember how His crucifixion fulfilled the Scriptures like Psalm 69, and they would remember how He said He would rise again.

And so the sign Jesus gave them is for us as well. Of course we should be about the business of rooting out sin from our own lives, and from the Church which is made up of all believers. Of course we should contend for truth and holiness, keeping our focus on God Who alone is worthy of our praise. But we must remember that it is the death and resurrection of Christ which is the only foundation of our faith, and which is the only basis of our forgiveness, and which is the motivation for all our efforts at holiness.

Hymn: Glory to His Name