



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B, MARCH 7, 2021
EXODUS 20:1-17; PSALM 19; JOHN 2:13-22

A HOUSE OF PRAYER

John 2:13-22 *[The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 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. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.]*

When I'm preparing a homily, I love to look at paintings of the scripture stories assigned for the day. Seeing the ways they have been depicted over centuries and in different cultures makes me feel connected to my Christian ancestors. And there are so many paintings of today's gospel – what is called the cleansing of the temple – especially from Renaissance Italy.

Almost always, Jesus is at the center of the action, typically clothed in red, arm raised with whip of cords ready to come down on a money changer. The scene is chaotic, crowded, with people scattering in all directions as tables flip, animal cages topple over, and birds get loose and fly free. It's hard to take it all in, but the visual depiction of chaos and violence matches the urgency and tone of the gospel we heard today.

There's a meme going around this week on social media. Overlaid on one of these typical Italian paintings are the words, "If someone asks, 'what would Jesus do', remind them that turning over tables and breaking out whips is a possibility." It kinda makes you stop and think.

All four gospels include today's story. Jesus travels to Jerusalem at Passover, joining hundreds of thousands of Jews in fulfilling the Torah requirement of making personal sacrifices to God in thanksgiving or atonement at the temple.

These pilgrims would arrive in Jerusalem needing to purchase animals for sacrifice, but they had to exchange their Greek or Roman coins first, which had the head of Caesar on them, to temple coins, which were free of such idolatrous images. The brokers charged a fee, of course.

And so as the Passover drew near, the temple's outer courtyard, the Courtyard of the Gentiles (named because that's the only place they were allowed to pray), became a sprawling open-air market with livestock dealers and money changers competing for sales.

In the gospel, Jesus enters this scene, immediately flipping tables, pouring out coins, and ejecting the vendors from the site. Specifically, all four gospels say that Jesus *drives them out* and that Greek word – *exebalon* – is the same one used to describe what Jesus does when he encounters people made miserable by evil spirits. He *drives out* the demons and he *drives out* the sellers and money-changers in the Temple, saying, "You shall not make my father's house a house of trade."

There is something about seeing Jesus act in anger that grabs our attention. For some, Jesus' anger is alarming and confusing – how can the good shepherd who draws the little children to himself lash out with such fury? Why doesn't he try a gentler approach first? For others, his anger is thrilling – witnessing Jesus' overthrow of unquestioned customs stirs up hope for change. You hear that in the meme I mentioned. But why is he angry?

Why is Jesus doing this? Do you notice that no one asks him that question? Instead, the religious leaders ask, "What sign is this? What authority do you have for doing this?" Almost like they know there is something

amiss but are surprised that this stranger is calling them on it.

If we focus on the main action, the problem looks like the vendors and money-changers. They were necessary so devout Jews could fulfill their Passover obligations, but their noisy business has taken center stage, disrupting the temple's true purpose of prayer and worship. So, Christians have long interpreted this story as a call to the church's renewal, to shaking up rigid practices and rituals in order to free authentic spirituality.

There are also some real social and economic injustices to be called out. There was a hierarchy of sacrificial offerings in the temple, where the richest men offer the grandest animals, poor people and women can only afford lesser doves, and price-gouging made it even worse for the poor. An economic system that concentrates power among a few and imperils the lives of many was the opposite of how Jesus described God's kingdom in 1st century Jerusalem and it remains the opposite in 21st century Seattle, too.

So this gospel story has something to say today. If there's anything we've learned in the last year, it is that the church must adapt

to serve, and that injustice runs deep in our society. And so, as the Saint Mark's community continues to gather in all our new ways and envision the future, these calls to renewal and justice ring all around us.

But there is more to Jesus' cleansing of the temple, and here's the thing. We don't see it by focusing on those *in* the story, but by focusing on those who *are not*. The Gentiles, the outsiders, the ones who have been crowded out of the one place in the temple they are allowed to enter and pray. Because of the chaos and spectacle of the market, they have no place in the house of God. And that's where some of the scriptural references in the gospel come in.

When Jesus shouts, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace," he is recalling the prophets Isaiah and Zechariah who insist God's kingdom manifests as universal inclusion and acceptance of all people. In Isaiah, God says, "I will gather all who keep my covenant – the foreigners, the outcasts, all my servants, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all people."

And Zechariah offers a sweeping vision of God's kingdom where holiness is so pervasive that there is no distinction

between Jew and Gentile and no boundaries between sacred and secular. He ends by saying, “[when the Messiah comes,] there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord.”

By driving out the vendors and money changers, Jesus reveals his identity as Messiah and sets the temple free to become what God desires – a house of prayer for all people. And so we are reminded that the point of a church, a community of faith, is not to gather the insiders, but to be a place that nourishes the spiritual lives of diverse people, allowing them to serve, challenge and inspire each other, with God’s help.

As we begin limited in-person worship and look forward to gathering together when the

cathedral reopens, as we rejoice to be with each other again, care for those who grieve, and dream of what comes next, we must keep asking,

“Who is not here? What do we not see? Whose story has not been heard? What voices in our broader community should we listen to about the needs of our neighbors? Who needs to be at the table or in a place of leadership to build God’s kingdom?”

“What would it look like to truly be a house of prayer for all people?”

God has set the temple free. Everyone has a place. Amen.

