

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

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*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. John 2:13-22*

Even though you are not sitting in the pews this morning, close your eyes for a moment and imagine Jesus. How do you see Jesus? Most of you have been inside of this church and love our stained-glass windows. They are beautiful. They are windows into the holy, illustrating the life of Christ and the story of God's people. We all have our favorite windows, but I would guess that the first window on the right as you face the altar is beloved by all of us. Jesus knocking on the door. Kind, gentle, flowing-haired Jesus, patiently waiting for us to open the door and invite him inside. Many of us grew up in churches where there were pictures of this meek and mild Jesus on the walls in our Sunday school classrooms, and our children's illustrated Bibles picture him this same way, sometimes with baby lambs and perfectly behaved children gathered around him. This is how we imagine Jesus. We would surely open our doors to this Jesus.

And then we hear the Gospel reading and the Jesus we just imagined seems to disappear before our eyes. He did not wait to be invited but entered the temple with intention. This is not kind and gentle Jesus we imagined. This Jesus is driving out the sheep, and cattle with a whip of cords. He's pouring out moneychangers' coins, turning over the tables and demanding that the people stop making his Father's house a marketplace! My seminary professor calls this story the Temple Tantrum! Is Jesus upset? Is he angry? Is he out of control? Maybe we aren't too sure about this Jesus.

I think it's important to notice a few things in this story. It's found in all four gospels, which clues us in to its importance. Jesus doesn't use the whip on the people, but to herd the animals out. Consider the possibility that he's not mad and this isn't an outburst, because it takes some time and patience to braid a whip. Like many prophets who came before him, Jesus is engaging in a carefully staged and symbolic street theater, to proclaim a word from God to the people. A word about how we sometimes mistake human law for God's law, about who is invited through the doors, and about where God is to be found.

The money changers were supposed to be there. They were part of the whole sacrificial system. People came to the temple to make a sacrifice, which was required of them by law. Both money and animals were necessary. Because Roman coins were engraved with images of emperors and false gods, they could not be used in the temple and had to be exchanged for temple currency. If a profit was skimmed off the top, well, that's just how the economy worked. It was how things were done. God's people had been making sacrifices in the temple in this way for as long as anyone could remember.

If all this is true, then what is happening here? Why did Jesus put an end to the day's activities? What exactly was Jesus proclaiming to God's people? As always, Jesus was proclaiming good news! The good news was that the people no longer had to make sacrifices in the temple because making an animal sacrifice in order to cast their sins on a scape goat, or a sheep, or cattle or doves was not what God desired. The good news was that God was not contained in one building (the temple), or in one city (Jerusalem), but was everywhere and at all times accessible to everyone.

Jesus was showing them that the temple, and I would add the Christian church, was not only a place to enter to find God, but also a place from which to go forth, proclaiming that everyone has access to God and we are called to help each other see God in the world and in one another. No one there that day quite understood all this, but when Jesus was crucified and in three days rose from the dead, it all became clear. Jesus made himself the sacrifice, once and for all.

Imagine Jesus entering our church this morning. What churchy things would Jesus find us doing, and what would he think, or maybe the better question is what would Jesus do? Remember that Jesus knows we are in a pandemic and are watching from home this morning, but what of Christ and Grace is he seeing? What are we doing that is pleasing, or displeasing, to God and what might Jesus want to tell us? How might Jesus be trying to get our attention?

We don't sacrifice animals here – that would be messy and offensive to our sensibilities. We may, however, engage from time to time in some money changing, perhaps some unconscious buying and selling of holiness. We focus on how many members we have, or the average Sunday attendance, or how to increase pledges, as if the only way to measure a commitment to God is in the church building on Sunday mornings. Are we studying scripture, offering prayers, and sharing the love of Christ the other six days of the week? We think that what we do here brings people closer to God, and I imagine the religious leaders of Jesus' day thought the same. Would Jesus overturn our table? What might Jesus drive out? Might Jesus invite us to go outside?

Like churches everywhere we are facing challenges. Sometimes when the challenges of life make us anxious, we cling all the more tightly to that which is familiar, known, and comfortable. We do this even if we know in our hearts that it's time to let go, to change, to move forward. This is why so many of us are longing for the pandemic to just go away so that we can get back to normal, so that we can return to the way things used to be. It's also why as we age we long for the past and share our memories. Memories are beautiful and valuable, but here's the thing - if we never move forward and do new things, then we never make any memories! If love of our history prevents us from embracing our future, it will keep us inside of a temple of memories that will eventually crumble and fall.

Methodist Bishop Will Willimon says that Jesus barges in and dislodges us from the burrows of religious seclusion, and that the sign we have been given is Resurrection. Jesus knocks on the door, Jesus enters our hearts to show us a better way, the way God has always intended for us to be in relationship. Confronting everyone in the temple that day, Jesus revealed that the true temple was his Body. In other words, where Jesus is, there is the temple, there is our access to holiness, to God. And the Body of Christ, that is, the Church, is called to follow – to go outside of our doors to teach, heal, feed, and love.

Close your eyes again, just for a moment, and imagine Jesus. How do you see Jesus now? Yes, he is always the kind, gentle Jesus here to feed us with word and sacrament. He is also the Jesus who will not allow us to remain huddled inside in fear; he is the One standing at the doorway to new life. Amen.