

Messiah Moravian Church (Virtual Sermon)
Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2021
Text: John 2:13-25
Dane Perry

John 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

ENDING, NOT CLEANSING, THE SYSTEM

“The Cleansing of the Temple” is a common title for today’s gospel passage but cleansing is not Jesus’s intention. “Cleansing” implies something needs to be cleaned up, changed or reformed. Jesus does not want to expel a few unscrupulous operators at the Temple; rather, he would end its unjust economic collusion with the ruling powers.

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan emphasizes that Jesus was “not against the Temple as such, and not against the high priesthood as such. It was a protest from the legal and prophetic heart of Judaism against Jewish religious cooperation with Roman imperial control. Jesus’s way is against any capital city’s collusion between...religion and imperial violence at any time and in any place.”

Jesus enters Jerusalem for the first time at Passover, which celebrates the liberation of the Jews from slavery. He made his trip after an extensive ministry in Galilee, preaching spiritual and economic egalitarianism. He expected to see a celebration of the Exodus liberation acts of God but saw instead a corrupted system that maintained the economic caste system. Crossan says that Jesus’s message of radical equality and liberation “exploded in indignation at the Temple as the seat and symbol of all that was non-egalitarian, patronal, and even oppressive on both the religious and political level.”

But what exactly enraged him? Jesus found two things: sellers who sold animal such as cattle, sheep, and doves for the offerings, and moneychangers who changed money from international

currency to local currency so that it could be used in the Temple. Both practices had been corrupted, yet both were central to the economic idolatry that sustained the nation and satisfied their Roman rulers.

Sellers sold the animals that were the required sacrifices at festivals and rites. The wealthy offered a large animal, like a cow or ox, while the poor gave doves or pigeons. However, to ensure “unblemished” animals, people were required to purchase their animals at the gate of the Temple where prices were much higher than those in the countryside. Of course, the costs tended to be felt more by the poor than the wealthy. For example, to purchase one pair of doves at the temple was the equivalent of two days’ wages. But the doves had to be inspected for quality control just inside the temple, and if the recently purchased unblemished animals were found to be in fact blemished, then a worshipper had to buy two more doves for the equivalent of 40 days’ wages.

Moneychangers were needed because neither the animal offerings nor the temple tax could be paid with the Roman currency in use for most of the national commerce. Roman coinage had images of the Roman Emperor who claimed to be a god. So, money had to be changed into usable local currency for Jewish worshippers.

Moneychangers bought and sold currencies outside of the Temple proper, in the “court of the Gentiles.” Jerusalem required a money changing industry because it was an international city that dealt in a number of currencies, and people needed a system for buying and selling. They used the moneychangers both for basic commerce and also for currency speculation. Indeed, with no one else to perform the function, moneychangers were the banks of first century Palestine.

However, corrupt moneychangers not only exaggerated the fees required for transactions but also inflated the exchange rate. The result was that for a poor person, the money changer’s share of the Temple tax was about one day’s wages and his share of the transaction from international to local currency was about a half-day’s wages. And that was before worshippers purchased their unblemished animals for sacrifice and then frequently had to buy them again at an enhanced price if the Temple inspectors found a blemish, as they often did.

Adding up all the expenses, a one-day stay in Jerusalem during one of the three major festivals might cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000 dollars in contemporary value. Jews were required to attend at least one of them each year. The ancient historian Josephus estimated that up to 2.25 million people visited Jerusalem during Passover, which would generate the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars, a substantial sum that helped swell Roman coffers. While all of this may appear immoral, none of it was illegal. These were businessmen operating within the law. But it took Jesus and a few radical rabbis to point out that the law itself was unjust.

So, what was Jesus’s response to the situation he found in Jerusalem? He commanded that they stop making the realm of God into a realm of commerce. He did not say stop abusing a good system. Instead, he demanded that the system cease.

Until his protest against the Temple, Jesus had preached and practiced inclusive table fellowship. But when he shifted from the controversial but more civically acceptable practice of eating with

others across diverse socioeconomic boundaries to confronting one of the very institutional systems that created and enforced unequal and unjust socioeconomic boundaries in the first place, he immediately came under intense suspicion for Jews and Romans.

Under Roman rule the priests were not autonomous in their authority over even religious matters. Roman officials appointed the chief priest, and he served their interest. Roman coffers benefitted from the marketplace that supported the sacrificial rites. A disruption at the marketplace during Passover affected Roman revenues and threatened a very tentative peace. In effect, Rome controlled the temple, and Jesus could not have been unaware that his demonstration would get the attention of Roman authorities. And in doing so, Jesus signed his own death warrant for Jewish and the Roman authorities.

Crossan notes that Jesus is concerned primarily with systemic rather than individual evil. He was executed precisely when he moved against the system. As Crossan says, “Those who live by compassion are often canonized. Those who live by justice are often crucified.”

God always stands with the powerless against the powerful, as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos fearlessly declared. Likewise, in keeping with his prophetic calling, Jesus railed against the abuses of power by Herod and the religio-political leaders of Jerusalem. Both he and his cousin John demanded great financial sacrifices of those entering and modeling the coming Kingdom of God.

Jesus engages in a public act that confronts religious and government institutions. Rome holds the ultimate power, and we often fail to recognize the lethal implications of that reality for Jesus. The traditional title “Cleansing the Temple” contributes to the perception that Jesus’s anger is directed at the corruption of a few Jewish officials. Instead, Jesus’s perfectly timed, radical demonstration is a direct condemnation of a religious institution in collusion with governmental power that together are complicit with or oblivious to the plight of the poor and marginalized.

During Lent we ponder what it means to follow Jesus and to walk the way of the cross. Specifically, Jesus’s demonstration in the Temple invites us to consider the complex relationships between civic and religious life and to discern appropriate Christian responses to civil authority. In America we value the separation of church and state, but in reality we have seen that they are not so neatly or even willingly separated.

Indeed, religious presumption, misplaced allegiances, pathetic excuses, smug self-satisfaction, spiritual complacency, nationalist zeal, political idolatry and economic greed in the name of God are surely some of the tables that Jesus would overturn in our time. Can we, like Jesus, harness the power of anger in the work of love?

Please join me in prayer:

CLOSING PRAYER:

You who move in the spaces between all of your creation, You who bind us in relationship to all things:

Sometimes we despair at the divisions in the world; our hearts clench fearing an ugly tomorrow; our brows furrow at the offense of others and we wall up our hearts. Some days it's just easier to be right than to understand.

So, today may we step into your Holy Mystery:

finding ourselves vulnerable, dependent, and totally loved. Help us rest in the web of life that supports us, our children, the winged and the four-legged, the orbiting planets and spinning atoms – that bond of love that makes us all one.

We pray this in hope and trust in the name of the Many and the One. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

Trusting that we are cared for and not controlled,
Loved and not law-shackled,
Blessed and not bound,
Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen