

“Trouble in the Temple”

John 2:13-22

5/20/18

This sermon series on John is requiring a good bit of preparation by Lou and me each week. I've put the books we're using on the table here, and we also have on-line resources that we can use. The reason there are so many resources available is because John is a gospel that raises lots of questions and there are lots of opinions about just about everything in it! This past week Bonnie and I were talking over dinner, and I mentioned that I spent part of the day preparing for this sermon by reading ten commentaries about this passage from John. Her response was telling: “It seems to me,” she said, “that if someone has read ten books about the gospel of John, they're going to be held to a higher standard at the final judgment!” Now, I've got to tell you, that had never even occurred to me before, but I thought you might be interested in what passes for conversation in your pastor's home!

OK. On to this morning's story in John 2. You'll remember that we left Jesus and a handful of his disciples at a wedding in Cana of Galilee where he rescued a wedding reception by turning a large quantity of water into wine. As I read, look for ways that this story might speak to our worship today.

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. (John 2:13-22)

Let's look at the story more closely. 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. (John 2:13,14) There are several terms here that are important. First, Passover. Passover was an annual Jewish feast that remembered the time when God intervened and rescued the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt by inflicting a series of plagues on their Egyptian slave masters until they allowed the Hebrews to leave. The last plague involved the death

of the firstborn in every house, unless the blood of a lamb had been sprinkled across the lintel of the door, as God had instructed the Hebrews to do. When the angel of death saw the blood of the lamb, he would pass over that home and spare its occupants from that awful plague. After this plague, Pharaoh permitted the Hebrews to go.

Passover was the most important Jewish festival of the year, and pilgrims would come to celebrate it from all over the Roman empire, swelling the population of Jerusalem many times over as they came to the temple. For there was only one Jewish temple, a magnificent place for people to worship their God- to give him offerings and sacrifices and songs in order to honor him. Herod the Great ordered this expanded temple to be built around 20 B.C., a work still in progress in Jesus' day. It was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans, never to be rebuilt again. What you see today at the site known as the Wailing Wall are just the large foundation stones and retaining walls of that ancient temple.

The temple was the heartbeat of Jewish religion and national pride, and was believed to be the place where God resided. If you wanted to worship God, this was your place. As an observant Jew, Jesus came to the temple during Passover. There, in the outer courts of the temple, he found money changers, as well as merchants selling sheep and cattle. Why were they there? People coming to the temple needed animals to

offer as sacrifices for the forgiveness of their sin and to give thanks to God. Old Testament law required that these animals had to be perfect, without any blemish, so you couldn't risk traveling to the temple with them as they could be injured and would therefore be unacceptable for sacrifice. So, they needed to be purchased nearby. And, the money changers were there because if you wanted to pay your annual temple tax, you had to pay it in local currency. So there was a legitimate need for both the selling of animals and for the changing of money. But Jesus was not amused by these practices in the temple.

In the painting on the screen, I love the sense of chaos with the doves flying up, the coins scattering, and the bull stumbling around. It's hard for us to appreciate what a provocative and dangerous act this was. Like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus performed a symbolic act of protest. And he made enemies that day who would harass him throughout his ministry. What disturbed Jesus is that they were disrespecting the worship of God by taking over one of the temple courtyards and turning it into a shopping mall! There was nothing wrong with buying and selling animals. Again, it was necessary for Jewish worship of that day. But it did not need to be done in the place that was set aside for the worship of God. Jesus was consumed by anger over this and went a little postal on those merchants and money changers!

I wonder if there are things we do today that disrespect the worship of God. For me, it's probably when I think about other things I need to do, rather than focusing on the worship of God while I'm here. There is nothing wrong with those other things I need to do, but this hour is supposed to be dedicated to worshiping and learning about God. So using it for other purposes is disrespectful. What about you? Maybe you are a little too casual about worship, or maybe you are focused on what you can get out of it, rather than what you are giving to God. Are there ways you disrespect God in your worship?

Annie Dillard has a wonderful quote that may jar our thinking about worship. She writes, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. 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 (like) children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a 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 someday and take offense or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." Perhaps we need to take worship more seriously, as Jesus was trying to proclaim in the temple.

There is also something else going on in the temple that I think prompted Jesus' anger. The buying and selling was taking place in the outer court of the temple, the court of the Gentiles. This was the only place where God-seeking Gentiles were allowed in the temple, the only place that they could worship God. And the chaotic atmosphere of commerce would have made that next to impossible. Jesus, especially in John's gospel, is always concerned about the whole world, not just those on the inside of God's covenant with Israel. And here, the Gentiles were being practically excluded from the worship of God.

I wonder if there are barriers here at GPC for some people who wish to worship God. I notice that there are few people of color in our worship services. I notice that there are few lower-income people, and that we have relatively few younger people. What subtle barriers might there be for those people coming to worship with us? I'd like you to talk about this with other friends here at GPC and report back to me! I'm interested in what you discover. Barriers.

Let's finish the passage. 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. (John 2:18-22) It's interesting to me that the Jews (clearly meaning the Jewish establishment, the temple leaders) don't question the rightness of what Jesus did. I'm guessing that some of them agreed with Jesus that commerce didn't belong in the temple! But they understandably wanted to know what gave him the authority to do this! So, they asked for a sign, for a miracle!

Jesus responds with a deliberately ambiguous statement. "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" Naturally, they think he is speaking of the magnificent temple of Herod the Great in which they are standing, and they scoff at this claim. But John lets us in on the secret that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body, which they did destroy and he did raise up after three days!

Remember how John often works on two tracks? There's the story, and then something else going on at the same time. In this case, we have the main story of Jesus cleansing the temple. But John is also beginning to make the case that Jesus himself is the new temple! In the last story, Jesus set aside the use of the purification water and made wine out of it, as a sign that a time was coming when those purification rites would no longer be needed. A similar thing is going to happen with the temple. Although

the temple was the heart of first-century Judaism, the place where God dwells, where good Jews go to encounter God and to experience the forgiveness of their sins, Jesus will soon fulfill those roles. As the Word made flesh, he is where you go to encounter God. As the Lamb of God, he is the one who has been sacrificed once and for all for our sins. He is the new temple. We'll say more about this when we get to chapter 4. But it's foreshadowed here.

Today, we believe that God can be found in Christ's body, the church. So we gather together each Sunday to encounter God, who comes into our midst. In just a minute we are going to petition this living, active God to meet us where we are. We are going to ask his Spirit to bring healing and wholeness where there is illness and brokenness. You may come forward to ask for prayers for physical, emotional, spiritual, or relationship healing, or to ask for prayers on behalf of someone else. When you come, please tell us your name and how we can pray for you today. If you are not coming forward, please pray for those who are, and others known to you who are in need of healing.