

John 2:13-22**Get Your Priorities Right!**

I want us to be able to picture this extraordinary story. It was almost Passover time in the Jewish religious center of the ancient world. So, thousands, maybe 300,000 to 400,00 pilgrims, were making their way to Jerusalem from countries near and far.

The Temple area was already in some state of disarray, because according to the gospel writer its expansion had been underway for 46 years. But when you entered the Court of the Gentiles—what you saw was even more confusion. Here was something like a bazaar, with vendors selling souvenirs, sacrificial animals, food, as well as currency changers, exchanging Roman currency for the kind you could use for holy purposes.

Also milling around were guides who provided tours of the premises and, for Jewish males, the inside of the temple itself. And priests—priests were everywhere, directing pilgrims and advising them on what kinds of sacrifices were to be performed, and what animals were acceptable for each.

And that was just the business performed in the Court of the Gentiles!

Enter Jesus, who saw all this activity and began knotting a whip of cords. Can you imagine—if he was already angered by what he saw, he must have been even angrier after cinching that last knot?

Read the story closer, and you'll see that unlike the reports in the other gospels, it's not the graft, the greed and dishonesty he sees that drives his anger. Instead, like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus challenges the Temple economy itself—the system that sustains the marketplace. He sees that it is focused more on gain—on wealth—than on prayer.

Last week I told you a story about Dietrich Bonhoeffer who started a seminary in his home country of Germany during the rise of Hitler. Here's an earlier story about him-- from 1930-- when he came to the US to study theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

His disappointment in the American church was something akin to what Jesus experienced in the Temple. He reported it like this:

“In New York . . . in the place of the church as the congregation of believers in Christ / there stands the church as a social corporation. Anyone who has seen the weekly program of one of the large New York churches, with their daily, indeed almost hourly events . . . anyone who has become acquainted with the embarrassing nervousness with which the pastor lobbies for membership—that person can well assess the character of such a church. . . . The church is really no longer the place where the congregation hears and preaches God's word, but rather the place where one acquires secondary significance as a social entity for this or that purpose.”

Bonhoeffer said this in 1930, and we know it be true still today. How often do we think that if we just had a program for young adults, or a

screen in the sanctuary for the words of the hymns, or a read-the-Bible-in-a-year program, or a healthy endowment, or, or, or. . . .

If we just had those things, we would be the kind of healthy church God intends. We think the more stuff we import into / or lay on top of / the primary purpose of the church—glorifying God—the more people we'll draw to us, and . . . *the more we can do!*

Like the folks in the Temple, too often we church people are more focused on gain—on wealth—than on prayer.

The question Jesus was asking with his demonstration of righteous anger was: Why are you busy in the Temple with selling and buying / and trying to meet/ the requirements of the / laws for sacrifice / to the *nth* degree? Why are you engaged in small talk and sightseeing in the Narthex, rather than preparing yourselves spiritually to meet the Lord?

Extrapolating this same idea into our own lives, we might ask: What do we do rather than prepare ourselves spiritually to meet the Lord? Do we make sure, if we do nothing else, that we've had two cups of coffee before we attend worship, or that we have on the right shoes with the right outfit first? Do we try to remember to sign up for the annual dinner outside the sanctuary doors or ask Tom about that building project he had been telling us about last week?

I knew a man at First Presbyterian in downtown Tulsa who would routinely come to worship 30 minutes before the service started, before anyone else arrived who he might be drawn into conversation with. I heard it's an old Scots tradition.

He would sit close up front, head bent and hands resting on the cane in front of him, and pray for all those participating in the service to be filled with the Holy Spirit. That's how to prepare yourself spiritually to meet the Lord in what Jesus called "my Father's house."

But even more important than any single lesson we can learn from this passage about how to live our lives in ways more pleasing to the Lord / we would do well to ask: *How can we know Jesus more deeply and fully having heard this story?*

Jesus' own disciples were certainly coming to know him better. When he drove everyone out of the Temple and overturned the tables, shouting, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" the disciples heard echoes of Psalm 69.

They had recited it all their lives, but now the words of that Psalm stood embodied right in front of them: "I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother's children. It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." They witnessed Jesus as the righteous sufferer of that Psalm.

Now / the one they knew as the Messiah had a target on his back, because he insisted / as had so many prophets before him / that everything about rituals and sacrifices, if performed at all, should be done out of true devotion to the Lord.

One of those prophets was Isaiah, who said,

“Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. . . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

This is not the Jesus of Christian curios and prosperity theology televangelists. This is Jesus who sees to the heart of the matter, and is angered—angered enough to crack a whip on the floor and drive all the busy, chattering people out of his Father’s sacred space. Not only that, this Jesus is trying to tell us he is God!

In his commentary on John, Bruce Metzger says that the gospel writer “would have us experience the Word made flesh—not simply understand him and theo-logize over him . . . [and] Jesus connects with each person or group uniquely and distinctively. In each instance, Jesus is revealed as larger than life.”

That is certainly true in our passage today. Jesus in his fury is larger than life; we don’t often see him like this. And we are forced to stand up straight and meditate on what he is doing.

Metzger goes on, "The notion of Jesus overturning tables at the temple is hard to categorize, and it challenges our domesticating agenda for Jesus. We often forget that we cannot commodify Jesus, even though we unwittingly tend to trivialize and 'trinket-ize' him in our minds and practices, turning him into our very own genie in a bottle, good luck charm or bobble-headed doll that we can purchase at the local Christian bookstore. We fall prey to this way of thinking and behaving because we become complacent in our spirituality, consuming and commodifying everything religious for our convenience."

And isn't that what was happening in the Temple that day? Isn't that what riled up our Savior?

Just as then, today we too are prone to make Jesus fit our expectations and prepackage him so that we can consume him whenever we like. We tend to forget that he can act this way: furious. . . . that he can act in any way he wants / but always out of love . . . for his Father, his Father's house . . . for us.

He can even do something as unfathomable as carry his own cross to Calvary, lay his body down on it, suffer spikes being nailed through his hands and feet, and be raised to the skies, bleeding and dying . . . finally. He can do whatever love leads him to do.

When Jesus comes to our house again, how will we receive him? What if he comes and starts moving furniture around and cracking his whip? Will we take the time to see past his fury to his heart

full of love? Will we conclude that there is a time to be tender and a time to be angry—even for the Savior of the World?

No matter how hard we try, we cannot prepackage Jesus, and we cannot control him. And wherever and however we meet him, *he* is the ultimate temple. He is the place where we meet to ask our biggest questions and worship God.

Metzger concludes, “I may not buy indulgences, and I may not indulge myself on a free-market consumer spirituality in which I carry Jesus around as a genie in a bottle or put him around my neck like a good luck charm. But do I put my whole body and soul into worship and in the offering plate when it comes around?”

Most of us have a long way to go toward that end. Whenever and wherever we meet our un-tameable and righteous Jesus again, let us worship him with our whole hearts, minds and souls. And let us begin now. Amen.