

Spring Cleaning

John 2:13-22

March 11, 2012

I.

Suppose an usher stood at the front door on Sunday mornings and sold service bulletins. "Get your bulletins here, two for a dollar!" Then imagine after we pass the peace there would be a short break so we could offer discounts on our St. Thomas coffee cups. And what if you could pay \$5.00 to go out and stretch during the sermon? Now that last one might have possibilities.

Seriously, however, we would not want those types of things to be part of our Sunday worship. But today's Gospel suggests that similar practices were going on in the Temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus took drastic action to stop it.

We probably are familiar with this story. It's one of those biblical accounts of Jesus' life that spill over into secular culture. The phrase "den of thieves" comes from this same story as it is told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And it has been depicted in famous paintings by Rembrandt, El Greco, and others.

Jesus went into the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, and drove away the cattle and sheep and doves being held there. He even made a whip of cords that he apparently used on somebody or something. It's the only example in the Bible of Jesus doing anything even remotely violent during his life.

And remember that Jesus also said blessed are the peacemakers, and love your enemies, and forgive others as you are forgiven. He calmly and gently dealt with public attacks and malicious trick questions from scribes and Pharisees. So what could have come over Jesus to cause him to do something that seems completely alien to his nature and teachings?

I will get to that shortly, but first let's consider why there were money changers and people selling animals in the temple in the first place. And what was the problem with what Jesus saw?

II.

As background, we should know that Jesus and many other Jews believed temple worship had been corrupt for a long time. During the centuries after King Solomon's reign the temple priests had been complicit in the systemic idolatry and injustice that eventually led to exile of the Hebrew people, and occupation of the promised land by pagan nations.

And then after the Jews were allowed to return from exile to restore their worship, a Jewish dynasty came to power for a brief time between the Old and New Testaments, threw out the legitimate priests, and appointed their own political priests.

This resulted in division, conflict, and a civil war that opened the door to Roman conquest of Palestine. It also gave rise to formation of various factions such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, who did not even exist in Old Testament times.

And because temple priests made compromises to get along with their Roman overlords, it was not surprising that the temple courts would be commercialized, especially for the ostensibly good purpose of serving Jewish pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for the Passover.

Here's how it worked. Temple worship involved a temple tax and ritual sacrifices of animals. The problem with the tax was that Roman coins were the required currency in use. And these coins had images of Caesar on them, which was blasphemy to Jews. It violated the first commandment about other gods, and the second commandment about graven images.

And although Jews did not have much choice about using Roman money in everyday life, they refused to do so in the temple. As a result, a cottage industry of money changers arose that exchanged Roman coins for other coins without images so they could be accepted in the temple.

Other people started shops that sold sacrificial animals. This was because many pilgrims came long distances, and it was easier to buy animals when they got to Jerusalem rather than deal with bringing their own animals along on the trip. In addition, the temple animals were guaranteed to be kosher, whereas the priests might reject a non-temple animal by finding it blemished.

So, you might think these activities were a public service to help people worship. But the money changers and animal sellers also charged excessive premiums, and there is evidence that they bribed the temple priests to allow them to ply their trades right inside the temple. And it certainly sent the wrong message about the sanctity of worship.

In addition, the atmosphere of Passover in Jerusalem was not unlike Mardi Gras in New Orleans on Fat Tuesday. The Jewish historian Josephus said that the population of Jerusalem increased from about forty thousand to almost three million during Passover, and that over a quarter million lambs were sacrificed each year (Wars, 6.9.3). It was a tumultuous time.

III.

In the midst of all this mass of humanity and clamor Jesus entered the temple court and trashed the place. Imagine the scene. Money flying around and rolling on the floor. Cattle and sheep released from their pens, bleating and mooing and stampeding about. Birds squawking and flying everywhere. Noise, chaos, dust, yelling, and shouting.

Did Jesus lose it here? Was he having a bad day? Or was it a righteous reaction? Some say he was angry and showed his human nature. But it's also human nature to do things for effect. Many good trial lawyers tell you they never lose control of their emotions in a courtroom. If they seem angry or upset, it's intentional and for a purpose. Was this what Jesus did?

And what did he think immediately afterward? Perhaps he looked back, surveyed the damage, and thought, "Ohhh, that felt good." Or did he say, "My God, what have I done?" Or maybe like my father told me when I was a boy, Jesus also said, "That hurt me more than it hurt you."

I believe Jesus was not angry in an out-of-control sense, and instead did it to make a point. He saw hypocrisy in how worship had been diminished, and he recognized a vast gulf between what he preached about God and what Jewish leaders were doing to honor God. It might have been different if these activities occurred outside the temple where other merchants operated.

And it's also likely that Jesus expected these practices to resume as soon as he left. He knew his real destiny was to redefine a new temple, not reform the existing one. That's why he proclaimed that he was the temple, and would be raised three days after his death.

But this reading still teaches that worship is a holy practice, not a business, and that God's temple is not a building, or even a place like Jerusalem, or Canterbury, or Rome. God's temple is the body of all Christians who in their own ways and in their own communities share worship and fellowship, and reach out to others. None of that, however, was evident to Jesus at the time.

IV.

Now, let's fast-forward this story. What would happen, hypothetically, if Jesus came to visit some twenty-first century churches? I realize that Scripture says we do not know when he is coming again, but please bear with me anyway. Suppose he came now for a preview. Where would he find hypocrisy? What would he cleanse?

Certainly he could find churches more interested in their buildings than the Gospel. He could find churches where the Easter egg hunt gets more attention than the resurrection. And there would be churches where it's more important that visitors fill out a pledge card than a pew card.

And he no doubt would hear worldly justifications for unspiritual practices. Our own Episcopal church seems focused on reacting to society rather than leading society. Other churches and denominations have similar problems. I have to believe Jesus surely must be disappointed with some of his shepherds.

But he also would find faithful churches where God's Word is taught and preached. He would find clergy and congregations where people care for each other and take their faith into the community. We try to do that at St. Thomas.

And people come to faith from different places. Jesus doesn't expect everyone to be the same. I recall a cartoon that showed a priest talking to a young man who had experienced a religious transformation and accepted Jesus as his Lord. And the young man had spiked hair and pierced ears, and was wearing dark and morbid gothic style clothes with chains and straps.

So the caption was the priest saying to the young man, "You realize now that you will have to dress normally" [step from behind podium, call attention to vestments, stole, etc]. That's right. The *priest* said the *other fellow* had to dress normally.

Anyway, if Jesus came today, he would see hypocrisy in the church just as he saw it two thousand years ago in the temple. Sometimes it's caused by unrighteous attitudes. At other times it's because the church, which is called to express Jesus' perfection, is run by us, who are well-meaning but imperfect people.

But we try anyway. And we want to be transformed by the Holy Spirit into faithful people. And as we encounter secular culture to raise our families and help those around us, we also know that through God's grace in Jesus Christ this world is just the next step on the way to living eternally with God.

Even so, we're in no hurry to do that. A popular country-western song by Kenny Chesney tells us that everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to go now. We are called to do our work here, to bring people to Christ now, and to be holy examples in the best sense of the word, not examples of the false piety Jesus encountered in the temple.

V.

So, today's reading is about who Jesus is rather than what he did. While his dramatic actions in the Jerusalem temple might be the stuff of paintings and shorthand clichés, the idea of himself as an entirely new temple foreshadowed his eternal ministry to humanity.

On April 15 we will have our annual spring clean-up of the church and grounds. We will get rid of some dirt, trim some plants, and cart off dead leaves and branches.

Today's Gospel describes a spring clean-up of a different type. It's about removing spiritual debris. Its about getting rid of worldly clutter that prevents the church from being what our Lord calls it to be. I believe we at St. Thomas also do a good job of keeping things clean in this way.

But the task never ends, does it? So I pray that during this Lenten season, and the seasons beyond, we will continue to support each other and shine forth as a light of Christ's righteousness into our community. And I am confident that prayer will be answered. *Amen.*