

John 2:13-22

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Lent 3

John 2:13 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

²⁰ The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Dear Friends in Christ,

“MY FATHER’S HOUSE”

The first thing to assault him upon entering the property was the smell. He had grown up in a farming community, so he knew what cows and sheep smelled like – but at a place of worship? And all those sources of odor were making plenty of their own noises. Markets – not markets selling silent hammers or sweet smelling herbs – but markets selling smelly noisy animals had been set up in the worship facility, together with noisy money changers.

I. Right Worship in God’s House

Frequently it happens that we end up in places we do not intend. We miss a turn, and then trying to get back to the right road we take another wrong turn, and suddenly we end up in a frightening part of town, our imagination getting the better of us, hoping that we will make it out alive!

And so it was with the market Jesus found in the temple that day: how could there possibly be a livestock market on the temple grounds? Well, it started with legitimate needs.

Jesus had come for the Passover. Passover was the greatest Jewish religious feast. Every observant Jewish male would make the trip to Jerusalem on an annual basis. On the same journey he would also make his sacrifices for the year, such as his thanksgiving offering, and offerings for religious vows and other such things. Jews would come walking from all parts of the land, even overseas. Jesus himself had just arrived from Galilee, some 70 miles away. Religious pilgrims would sell animals at home and then purchase others for sacrifice them when they arrived in Jerusalem. There would be loss, but it would be better than your and your twelve friends trying to drive thirteen sheep down a road for 70 miles!

There was also the annual temple tax. Roman, Greek or Persian or other coins were in everyday use in Israel, but coins from pagan sources were not allowed to pay the temple tax. This tax could only

be paid with a special coin not in common circulation. So the money changers did a brisk business with all of the tens of thousands of religious pilgrims. Coins were less standardized. Ancient coins were always minted from precious silver or gold. This made for all kinds of problems. Some had edges shaved off, some were of non-standard size, others were counterfeited (think of the old western movies where the doubting bar-tender tests the \$20 gold piece by biting it). Because of all these problems with coinage, the money changers would sit in a market near the temple, weighing and haggling over the coinage brought in by the worshippers.

So this was the scene upon entering the temple – a livestock market and a money changing operation. It was nothing like entering a hushed cathedral. If you think a child or two crying during a sermon is disruptive, just imagine these outer courts of the Jewish temple. What irony! Here Solomon and more recently Herod had specially cut and fitted the stones for the temple building project off site so that no hammer would be heard at the construction site. But even as it was being constructed there was no end of bleating sheep, lowing cows and bartering marketeers!

The livestock market, the money changing, all served important functions. Not the business, but the location was the problem.

It is frequently said – I myself have said it – that from the time of Abraham up until the time of Jesus, God specially chose one tribe. That was the Israelites, who are now called the Jews. Sometimes I have perhaps given the impression that only the Israelites were God's people in those days. But not so. In fact, there was a special prayer that one Israelite prayed. About half way between Abraham and Jesus, King Solomon son of David built and dedicated the first temple. On that day, Solomon prayed, *“As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name... when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the people of the earth may know your name and fear you”* (1 Kings 8:41-43). That explains the largest feature of Israel's temple. The temple at Jerusalem had an outer court, well maintained and part of the temple complex where even non-Israelites could come to worship.

But that outer court where evangelized foreigners could come, that is where the market was set up. “Welcome to our church. Pardon the mess... and the noise... oh, and the smell. You will just have to worship out here with the cows and goats.” Do you understand why Jesus, when he entered his Father's house, why zeal for God's house consumed him?

Thus Jesus found ropes, bound them together and wielded his scourge. A whip has a curious effect upon a bull. Even a child can drive a bull into a frenzied gallop. Likewise the sheep went running. As Jesus poured out the cash drawers of the moneychangers' tills, all dignity left them. They scrambled on the ground to catch every coin ringing off the pavement. ***“How dare you turn my Father's house into a market”*** (16). The same zeal for the same Father's house where a twelve year old had said, ***“Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?”*** (Luke 2:49).

But was this the right way to take care of a problem? Did Jesus just lose it? We are used to seeing a very different Jesus—and for good reason. God would prefer to be known as a God of love. He wants to have a close and loving relationship with each of us. But sometimes the most loving response in a relationship is calling to account: ***“How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!”***

Everyone knew whose house this was. Everyone knew the reason God's house was here. Jesus was not talking to people who thought the speed limit was 45 because they just plain missed the 35mph sign. Jesus was talking to people who brazenly ran the red light swerving through traffic at a speed permissible nowhere except on the German autobahn. These people pursued their own profit where God was to be honored. They took up the space of worshippers because they needed more room for retail. And so the Son of God was most right in his anger and rebuke.

Thankfully, I have not tripped over any goat tethers this morning. And I am not aware of big things which get in the way of our worship, but I do not see all you see. Let our church never be a place where people feel shut out. In the matter of worship, people should feel free to mention concerns of things that interfere with worship. God's house should be a place where you feel close to God, where you feel the wonder of God's forgiveness in a gathering of friends in Christ.

Of course, this requires give and take. People have various opinions. Through discussion and consideration of our fellow Christians and God's word, these things will be worked out.

When I or others have been lazy or self-seeking in our preparations for your worship or care of our Father's house, we must be willing to seek God's forgiveness. Then, when we approach in repentance, Jesus puts down the whip and he looks at us and welcomes us, assuring us that all that was wrong, has been put right in him who died for us.

II. Worship Which Listens in Our Father's House

Jesus wanted his rebuke to fall on listening ears, to produce repentance. It did not. For when Jesus cleansed the temple, not just of the filth of the animals, but also of the profiteering and godless cynicism, we hear, ***"Then the Jews demanded of him, 'What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?'"*** (18).

Briefly to mention, when John uses the phrase ***"the Jews,"*** we should bear in mind that John was no anti-Semite. John himself and, of course, Jesus were also Jews. Studying all of the Gospel of John one finds out that when John uses this phrase, he is usually referring to "the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus."

Those Jewish leaders, seeing Jesus cleanse the temple, questioned him rather than considered his message. These men profited greatly from the temple trade. These markets were popularly called "The Markets of the Sons of Annas." Yes, the same Annas who had been high priest and an enemy of Jesus. So great was the popular resentment of this priestly profiteering that about 40 years after this, the Jews themselves drove these markets from the temple grounds (Edersheim).

Those who approached Jesus were practiced politicians in the worst sense of that word. Note the cunning of their words. They could not contest the rightness of what Jesus did. That never entered the argument. Because they could not contest that Jesus had done something that needed to be done, they instead attacked Jesus himself. You've seen that in politics, haven't you? "Don't talk about the problem, attack the person." They glossed over the market and money changing abuses and demanded some sort of miracle.

What happens next is consistent. It happened at least two other times when enemies pressured Jesus for a miracle (Mt 12:39ff; 16:4). Rather than lower himself and stoop to their hypocritical demands, he refuses. These religious leaders knew that Jesus had already performed miracles. Another miracle would not convince them (John 11:47). Rather in their twisted practice of politicized religion they would turn it into an excuse to persecute Jesus. So Jesus simply said, ***"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days"*** (19).

He said something they could not possibly understand at the time; not even his disciples did. But much later, when it came true, they would be without excuse. Most ironic, these same enemies would help fulfill this sign. They would be the ones to destroy the temple of his body, which he would then raise.

For those who already believed in Jesus, the Holy Spirit worked even greater faith through these words. ***"After [Jesus] was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken"*** (22).

God's Word works like that. The Holy Spirit works through that word. He worked faith in those disciples so that years later, when Jesus died and rose, these words strengthened their faith. Like mother Mary, they may not have understood all that Jesus said, but they stored these things up in their hearts. When the time came, these long-ago planted seeds sprung to life. They saw the risen Lord and they thought, "*That* is what he meant when he said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days!"

That is the point of worship. In worship, God comes to us in his word. That word works in each of us. See how it worked in the disciples. When they saw Jesus chasing the livestock and money-changers out of the temple, what did they remember? They remembered a Word of God from Psalm 69 which said, "***Zeal for your house will consume me***" (17). See the continuity. As the disciples witnessed an event in their day, they made connections with God's Word of the past. In the future, when they witnessed other events, they thought of God's Word they heard on this day.

May God's words be so precious to us! Let us ever do that which Jesus himself did, let us come regularly to hear God's Word. Take God's Word to heart. Through that word, God's Holy Spirit will work in us to will and to do what God desires. Amen.