

YearB Lent 3  
John 2:13-22

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Jesus with a whip of cords in his hands, driving animals out of the temple, turning over tables, pouring out boxes of coins—this is not Wesley's “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” No, this is the prophetic Jesus. This is the Jesus who is telling us the way things should NOT be. This is the Jesus who is so outraged at what he's seeing in his father's house, that he literally takes things into his own hands. This is righteous anger—this is dangerous—this is demanding. This morning Jesus has some things to show and to tell about holiness.

This morning we have a switch from Mark's gospel, which is the gospel of most of Year B, to the gospel of John. It's not because the story of the cleansing of the temple isn't in Mark—it's actually in all of the gospels. The reason we have John's version here is probably because it's longer, with more details, and it has Jesus's mention of his being raised up in three days, preparing us for Easter.

Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem because Passover is near, and they want to be in the holy city to celebrate. Now John places his version of the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, where all of the other gospels put it towards the end. John starts Jesus out in this prophetic mode. The clue as to why this story is here, instead of at the end of John's gospel, is in Jesus' statement: “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The temple authorities think he's talking about the building, understandably, and they ridicule Jesus, saying “this temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” John makes it clear that the authorities don't understand, and then he explains Jesus' meaning, just to be clear: “But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.” So in placing the cleansing of the temple so early in Jesus' ministry, John lets Jesus predict his death and resurrection to the reader—to US—now—so we see the foreshadowing of Jesus' ultimate destiny. John also uses this dramatic irony, that we know what's going to happen, and the disciples and temple authorities don't, to provide a sort of grim humor. And later his disciples remember that he'd said this, and it gives them even more reason to believe in his divinity.

Today, since we don't have temple sacrifices, there can be some confusion about why Jesus was so upset about what was happening here in the first place. Yes, the Jews were required to make animal sacrifices for various reasons, and the first seven chapters of Leviticus outline the different kinds of burnt offerings that were required. The sacrifices varied depending on whether you were wanting anything from forgiveness of sins, to purification. For instance, if you were making a guilt offering, you should sacrifice a flock animal of some kind—a goat or a sheep. Status and wealth made a difference, too; if you were poor, you could offer a bird, instead—and

if you were very poor, you could offer grain. A sin offering from the chief priest (highest status) had to be an entire bull, whereas the average person only had to offer a female goat, or a lamb.

So there did need to be animals available for people to buy **near** the temple. But, from an ancient Jewish perspective, there are several things wrong with what Jesus finds, when he arrives at the temple. First of all, animals were being kept **inside** the temple—in the court of the gentiles. The temple in Jerusalem was built in a series of enclosures: first, was the court of the gentiles, which is where non-Jews were allowed. Then, inside of that area was the sacred enclosure, then inside that was the court of Israel, then the court of the priests (and at this point, only the priests were allowed), then there was the porch, in front of the holy place, then inside everything else was the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant was kept, which held the two stone tablets of the 10 commandments. Do you remember Raiders of the Lost Ark?

So think of it being from the least holy place in the temple, the court of the gentiles, to the most holy place, the holy of holies. But still, the court of the gentiles is part of the temple—it's still “my father's house,” and so keeping the animals in the temple was not the thing to do. I mean, imagine bulls, sheep, goats, birds, all penned inside the temple. The mess, the smell, the noise! Much better to sell the animals that had to be used in sacrifices outside the confines of the temple proper, and there were booths along the walls for exactly that. So Jesus starts driving the animals out with his whip.

There's also something wrong with the changing of money. People came from all over to worship at the temple, and they carried many different currencies. But temple taxes, and the purchase of sacrificial animals, had to be paid in the half-shekel of Tyre—temple money—so people would exchange a certain amount of whatever coinage they carried into half-shekels. Apparently, though, the money-changers tended to cheat people when they did the exchange, and make an unfair profit on the transaction, taking advantage of worshipers in the process.

So there are two glaringly inappropriate activities going on in the temple: animals being penned within the temple itself and defiling it, and the monetary cheating of worshipers. One might see how these things might have happened over time, with the idea of making things more convenient for worshipers—and authorities might have turned a blind eye to abuses. But that didn't make it right. And yet there's more—there's another layer of meaning here.

It's easy for us to look at Jesus' activity in the temple, and, in spite of his whip-wielding, and anger, to feel fairly safe. After all, Jesus was talking to the corrupt temple officials, the animal sellers and the money changers, and trying to make things holy in Jewish worship, right? This is all about a first century issue, and is something that pits Jesus against Jewish authority. It sets him up for them to fear and hate, and ultimately crucify him. So it's not even about us, right? Well, it is about us.

Jesus has a challenge for us today. Because WE are the church now, and today we have our own money-changers and animal sellers, symbolically speaking. Jesus is challenging us to think about

what **we're** doing that separates us from God. What are **we** putting in the way of God today? Because Jesus isn't just cleansing the temple. He is also making a statement about what it means to be holy. He's showing that holiness is not just about following the commandments, and performing rituals. It's not about sacrificing animals—it's about sacrificing SELF. Sacrifice of self is not something our culture encourages anymore, and it's hard. Jesus says holiness is about loving God with all your heart, and loving your neighbor as yourself. So in our Church NOW, what tables need to be overturned? What things might need to be driven out of the Church today? It can be hard to think about it. It can be hard to think that Jesus might be standing in front of **us** with his raised whip. But what if he is? What if, in his righteous anger, he's calling us to stop doing something, in order to walk more closely with him. **As the Church**, to stop thinking of our own gain, and think, instead, of God, and of others. It's possible.

Even if we're not feeling especially prophetic, Lent gives us an opportunity every year to reassess, and to contemplate some hard truths. Sometimes we do things with the best intentions, but what we do isn't what's really needed. As we continue our Lenten journey, let's listen to God's call to who we are to become, and how we can best love God and our neighbor. We can think about how we've "always" done things, and wonder how we might be called to do things differently. Is what we're doing really serving God? Or is it serving us? If we are faithful to Jesus' call, we can embody his prophetic stance, and truly follow him. Amen

The Rev. Melanie Lewis  
Rector, Christ Church Millwood