

John 2:13-22

The story of the cleansing of the temple is found in all four gospels. In the Synoptic accounts (Matthew, Mark and Luke), this event is a turning point in the final week of Jesus' ministry. John the Evangelist, on the other hand, hurls us into confrontation almost immediately. This incident takes place at Passover, early in Jesus' ministry, immediately following the wedding in Cana. From the beginning Jesus is in conflict with the religious establishment. Many scholars say that Jesus' actions and words in cleansing the temple that day would eventually get him killed.

What was all the merchandizing activity in the temple area about? In Jesus' day a sacrificial system existed that allowed people to offer sacrifice at the temple in order to have their relationship with God restored. Just as the season of Lent helps Christians prepare for Easter, Jews traveled to Jerusalem early in order to purify themselves for Passover. Many Jewish pilgrims traveling great distances, instead of bringing an animal with them from home, would purchase one at the temple.

Also needed was a means of exchanging the foreign currencies of visitors from all over the world. Greek and Roman coins had pagan images imprinted on them and some had inscriptions declaring Caesar divine. These coins were considered blasphemous by the Jews and were forbidden in the temple. Money changers were important because pilgrims needed to exchange their foreign coins for the half-shekel, the only coin acceptable for paying the temple tax.

So, what's the problem? The problem was that the sacrificial system of worship had become an end in itself, an idol. Prayer had been pushed out by corruption and exploitation. Worship had been superseded by human greed, the inevitable human attempt to corrupt sacrificial law and derive a profit.

For Jews, Jerusalem was the Holy City and the temple its most holy place. Yet what Jesus found there was no different from the streets outside the temple gates. The sacrificial system of Judaism had deteriorated into a money making scheme for sellers who charged inflated prices and for temple authorities who raked in the cash. The holiest of places looked just like the marketplace. What was intended to be a model of another way of living, an example of God's way embodied in the Ten Commandments, had become no different from the ways of the world.

Why is Jesus angry? He saw that ordinary people who were seeking to be in right relationship with God were being cheated in the holiest place on earth – and

Jesus got mad! He fashioned a whip out of cords and drove out the animal sellers and money changers who represented the domination system of his day. Rather than reforming the system, telling the religious authorities and their assistants to do better, Jesus called down judgment on them. He confronted the system that kept God and the people of God apart, while enriching the pockets of elites at the expense of the poor.

One aspect of God's character revealed in both Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament is God's anger. The anger of God made evident in Hebrew Scriptures is not a habitual anger. God isn't a cosmic sorehead ('shape up or I will banish you to the perpetual pit of misery where there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth!'). But neither is God a cosmic butler ('how would you like that mana from heaven, plain, whole grain or sourdough?').

For the Jews, God has a full range of emotions and can be personally offended. A God without anger would be a neutered God, hardly the Lord of Creation. God's anger burns momentarily at specific instances of injustice or faithlessness on the part of people, but God's covenant love endures forever.

In today's gospel Jesus reveals the righteous anger of God when human greed and corruption infiltrate what is good and intended to help people. While mercy is available to those who sincerely seek it, we must not ignore or forget Jesus' indignation when he meets injustice, especially injustice against those seeking God. When Jesus fashioned a "whip of cords" and turned it loose on the temple establishment, chances are pretty good that he didn't have a smile on his face, or that he ran the idea before his disciples before he acted. He just let it rip.

One of the few scraps of evidence that would be mustered against Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin was that he had spoken against the temple: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another without hands'" (Mk. 14:58). A new temple would be raised, a temple not made of stone but a temple open to all and for all. This new temple will be Jesus himself, the crucified and risen Lord, who will replace the temple building and its sacrificial system. Jesus himself will make it possible for people to be in right relationship with God and each other.

John the Evangelist is saying to his community, living after the fall of the temple and likely expelled from their local synagogues, that they didn't need the temple. Jesus is sufficient to mediate God's grace and mercy. There is no need for changing money, purchasing animals or making ritual sacrifice. In Jesus, God's holy temple, we are invited into the intimate relationship Jesus has with the Father.

So, what's the take home message? Our gospel today beckons us to realize that Jesus desires the church to be a community of prayer and worship where people have opportunities to connect with God and each other without barriers. The current pandemic may have forced us to be physically distanced, but as members of the body of Christ we are not called or destined to be socially or spiritually disconnected.

Today's gospel story challenges us to identify where we might be falling short of God's desires for us as individuals and as a church community. Are we free of barriers to those who are seeking God and the supportive fellowship of a Christian community? In what ways might we become a more hospitable community where anyone seeking God and the fellowship of God's people feel they are welcome, safe and free to join in?

As we walk the path to Easter during Lent, we join crowds of pilgrims who for millennia have journeyed to prepare for festivals celebrating God's saving acts. Rather than seeking a physical temple or church building, we are able to worship in Spirit and truth, remembering God's glory and grace made manifest in Jesus. Our hope and faith is in Christ, who gave his life for us that we might have new, abundant life in him, resurrection life. Our call and our challenge is to share that life with others.

Resources: Synthesis, 2009, 2015; Alicia Moyer, Working Preacher, 2021; David Lose, 2018; Jude Siciliano, 2009, 2021; Marilyn Salmon, 2012.