



“Cleansing the Temple”

Text: John 2:13-22

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

This story of Jesus overturning the tables at the Temple is a very familiar story. It is found in all four gospels. But unlike in the synoptic gospels, where the story comes much later in the life of Jesus, John puts this story near the beginning. And, I'm sure you've heard many sermons on this story based on Jesus' protests that his house of prayer has become a den of robbers. However, in John's gospel the focus is not on who is getting rich off the backs of innocent worshippers, but on the worship itself.

I have spoken before about the thin places, those places where it seems almost as if heaven and earth are touching. The Temple was one of those places for the Jews. The one place where God's presence was known to dwell. Faithful Jews made the pilgrimage there each year to worship God through sacrifice, and the merchants and the money changers were a necessary part of that ritual system. If you remember, Mary and Joseph went to the Temple after Jesus was born and bought doves to make sacrifice in thanksgiving for their son. This was all part of the Jewish belief and the ritual system.

So what makes Jesus get so angry now when he goes to the Temple and why does John place this story so early in Jesus' ministry? And is this about money and corruption or is there something else at play? Is this about the money or is it about the attitude of the people toward worship? Of course the answer to these questions come at the end of the story. The first question that needs to be asked is what message is Jesus trying to give with the turning over of the tables in John? And because John was so focused on eschatology, the end times, he was telling the disciples and anyone who would hear that he was now the temple, that he would die and rise again; and so the worship of God would no longer be constrained to one place, because to worship God would no longer entail a building.

For this time that Jesus walked the earth, he is telling the disciples and all who had ears to hear that he was now the “thin place”, the place where they can connect with God. And that is good news for Jesus’ disciples and all who encountered Jesus, this Word of God in the flesh. But what about us who don’t see Jesus in the flesh; who don’t hear the words and see the miracles? The Temple of Jesus’ body has come and gone. Yes, we know that Jesus lives in our hearts, but is there no place that we have access to God as they did when Jesus walked the earth? Is there no thin place that we can go to experience God’s presence in the world firsthand, to see the Living God?

And that leads us to the second point of the story. If we were to read just another couple of verses we would see that it says that Jesus knew people, he knew the heart of people, what was “in” them. And perhaps that is also why Jesus overturned the tables at the temple, because true worship was not happening - ritualistic worship was happening, but Jesus wanted the people’s worship to be personal, deep, intimate. And so he overturned the tables to say that this animal sacrifice way of worshipping was not what God wanted, but the sacrifice of one’s own life, just as Jesus was preparing to sacrifice himself, was the kind of worship that he sought from his followers. If anyone lays down his life for another...

This scripture is a perfect scripture for Lent, because it provides us with questions we should be asking ourselves during this season of reflection. The first being, if Jesus was to come into your life right now and flip some tables, what would they be? What things are keeping you from the fullness of worship in God? For some it may be ritual. There is both life and death in ritual. Ritual can bring comfort, security, and a knowing that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but ritual can also mean death, as we go into a mind disconnect, as we say the words and do the actions without really thinking, reflecting, on what is being said and done.

I may have told this story before, but I went to school with a guy who was Catholic and bought into the idea that you can’t miss mass. One semester he had no classes on Fridays and so would start drinking on Thursday evening and he would drink throughout the weekend. My girlfriend, who was also Catholic, said that this guy was in church every Sunday. He was hungover and slept through a lot of the service, but he was always there - ritual that didn’t bring life. Living out the law without true worship, without experiencing the grace that comes through Christ. He had plenty of tables that needed to be flipped over.

So we each need to ask ourselves, if Jesus were to come into the temple of our lives, what tables would he need to flip? Selfishness, self-absorption, greed? Would he need to flip over tables that brought creature comforts? Priorities on a nice house, a nice car, nice vacations? Whatever it might be that holds your focus rather than your focus being on God and the needs of God’s people, like praying and advocating for the people suffering in Gaza or the gun violence that is taking so many lives across this country or from being present to the person in the pew next to you who may be grieving or feeling stressed over finances or needs to know they are not alone in their

daily struggles that at times seem to be overwhelming? As one commentator wrote, Jesus wants us to stop naval gazing. I thought that was apt. Me. Me. Me. That is what our society has become and it is hard to not be sucked into that.

I got married while in seminary. The first church my ex was at was a wealthier congregation in Kinston, North Carolina. We were fresh out of seminary and poor. I began working at a county mental health center counseling in the Children and Family department. For the first time we had two incomes coming in. We were also being invited into the homes of the church members. Beautiful homes! One evening I was talking to my husband and I started talking about all the things I wanted to get for our house. On the top of the list was new furniture. No more garage sale specials. A new sofa. A real dining room table, and the list went on. He looked at me and finally said, "do you hear yourself? Everything is I want." His words brought me back to my senses. It's not wrong to want nice things, but when it takes the focus away from true worship and service of God, then it is wrong.

Over the years, through various clergy events I've attended, there are times when discussion has turned to a congregation's focus on their sanctuary. While the ritual of worshipping in a setting such as this can bring life, it can also bring death if the focus is on OUR Beautiful church, OUR beautiful sanctuary, rather than on what happens within these four walls. We are to come into this building to worship God, to be fed by God's Holy Word, but then there is the second part to it. Jesus cries, "Get outside of these sanctuary walls! Are there hungry people in your city? Go feed them! Are there homeless people? Go find them a place to sleep. Is anyone hurting, lonely, feeling helpless? Go sit with them. Is anyone the stranger? Go welcome them. That is because as the people found God in the presence and person of Jesus Christ who embodied the Spirit of God, we now are the Body of Christ. We are now the hands, feet, voice, and heart of God and we need to go out beyond these walls to do as Jesus did for the people of his time and for us. We can see Jesus. We can see God. Because we are now the Body of Christ. We should only have to look around at each other to see God, to be in the presence of God, to find comfort and hope and faith. And others need to see Jesus. Others need to encounter the Christ. Others need to hear the Good News that Jesus brought and we are the only ones to do that. We, the sons and daughters of the Living God, are the embodiment of God's Spirit, so we need to go out into the world so others can see God, so others can see the face of Christ, so others can experience God's abiding love, God's abundant grace, and God's transformative mercy.

The final question for this morning is: if Jesus was to come and drive you, this congregation, out of this building, what would he be wanting you to go do? What specifically does God want you to do in Evansville and beyond? Is it simply to write a check or is there more that you are being called to do, to get involved in? Is there more energy and focus God is calling this congregation into that will make a more influential impact on this community and beyond? These are the questions we need to be asking ourselves not just during Lent but throughout the year.

So, What tables need to be flipped over in my life? Am I coming to church and entering into true worship with God or am I coming out of habit or duty? Am I allowing my mind and my spirit to be fully engaged in worship? And, what am I called to do when I leave this place? What is this congregation called to do when we leave this place?

The first strand of the Matthew 25 Initiative is Vital Congregations and this isn't about numbers of people or how much money a church has, but about how vital the faith is within the congregation and the actions the church involves itself outside of the sanctuary. We are called to be a vital congregation in our worship and our ministry. So I challenge you as you go through the rest of this Lenten season to ask yourselves these questions and seek to have God involved in the questioning and answering. In this way, your worship and ministry will be transformed. Amen.

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