The Marketplace—Jn 2:13-22

Often, when scholars discuss the cleansing of the Temple, they begin by noting the reasonableness of there being animals for sale and money changers at the Temple. I’m going to start with the scene, though. The Temple in Jerusalem at Passover—what was it like there? You’ve been to Chicago, or St. Louis, and to other major cities. Maybe you’ve been there during the Christmas holidays, maybe downtown, in the shopping district. What do you remember? The crowds, the weird feeling of being carried along by the crowd, that human tide. The noise—people talking, traffic, honking, Salvation Army bells ringing, music, the sound of all those footsteps on the sidewalk. The jostling as you try to get out of the midst of the crowd and into the building you’ve been looking for. A kind of excitement, a vague, faint kind of panic, maybe.

The Temple in Jerusalem at Passover would have sounded, looked, and felt much the same—except there would have been no deodorant. Busy. Bustling. Excited. The sounds of the animals in their pens and cages. The sounds of coins clinking and the animated haggling and bargaining in progress at the money changers’ tables. Many people, from all over Israel, would make an annual pilgrimage up to Jerusalem for the occasion. Jesus and his disciples have gone up. The Passover, at that time, involved making animal sacrifices to God. Animal sacrifice was very much a part of Jewish worship at the Temple.

By such sacrifice, people offered up something of value to God. By it, God provided atonement for their sins. By it, the faithful showed gratitude to God. By such sacrifice, an agreement was ratified with holy solemnity.

Animals had to be available, and animals were sold for sacrifice. Money was necessary to buy these animals, but the money changers weren’t there to help people get the money they needed to buy these animals: you don’t have to convert pesos into dollars or Euros into pounds to buy animals. The money changers were there so that the faithful could pay the Temple tax: the tax that paid for the ongoing construction and upkeep of the Temple. Probably, you’ve never thought much about what you see on our money: faces of presidents and prominent Americans from the early days of our country. Ho hum. Before that, our money typically bore the faces of Native Americans (not any particular Sioux or Pawnee or Cherokee, mind you). Some nickels and quarters bore the image of a rather Roman-looking woman: Lady Liberty. We don’t think anything of it. It’s just money.

Such images would have been absolutely forbidden at the Temple, for fashioning images of any living thing easily ran afoul of the Second Commandment, which we just heard earlier this morning. Roman coins were especially offensive, because those coins bore the image of the emperor, and the emperor was regarded as divine, as a god.

In the Roman Empire, there was a lot of Roman currency in circulation. Nobody in their right mind was going to use money bearing the image of a pagan god to pay the tax for the Temple of God. They needed to convert the money they used back home into money acceptable at the Temple.

So, Jesus is opposed to animal sacrifice and to paying the Temple tax?? No. That’s not the objection Jesus raises. Do you remember what he says? “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (2:16). Stop making my Father’s house a place for buying and selling.

If we don’t pause for a moment, we’re not going to hear something very important—a couple of very important things. Jesus does not say, stop making this *Temple* a place for buying and selling. He doesn’t say Temple. He says house. We’ve heard the phrase “the house of The Lord.” These days, we don’t often speak of a church as the house of The Lord, but many of us remember when people did speak that way. This church is more than a place where we meet once a week. It’s more than a meeting hall. That point has been driven home quite powerfully for many of you, when you’ve come here in the radiant quiet, when it was not Sunday, come here to be in the presence of God. Now, we’re always in the presence of God, but this place somehow manages to make God’s presence plainer to us. We know we’re always in the presence of God, but this place somehow makes us feel that presence more poignantly.

This place is not just some place where we gather to transact business once a week. The people gathered there in Jerusalem were gathering at the Temple, but Jesus tells them not to think of it as a Temple but as what it truly is, a house, the house of his Father.

Jesus calls that place his Father’s house. Not many people in Scripture speak of God as their father. The psalms speak in places in ways that suggest the king was regarded in a special sense as the “son” of God, the adopted son, that is. To the ears of those listening to Jesus, he was speaking as though he were king, like David, Solomon, or Josiah. Jesus was claiming a very special connection between himself and God. His disciples already knew that there really was a very special relation between Jesus and God, but all those strangers at the Temple in Jerusalem didn’t know that. They just knew that Jesus was speaking very strangely. That’s still the case today. We know that Jesus has a special relation to God, but many don’t know that; they hear us and think we are speaking strange things strangely.

In any movie about the life of Jesus that I’ve seen, I’m always very interested to see how the cleansing of the Temple is handled: what Jesus sees, the impression it makes on him, what he does, and how he seems to be feeling afterwards.

Prior to the crucifixion, this is probably the most turbulent moment in the Gospels: especially because here it is Jesus who is the agent of the turbulence. Gentle Jesus, kind Jesus, peaceable Jesus! He’s really shaking things up. It’s been clear from early on, even as early as the first demon he cast out or the first healing, that Jesus has come to shake things up, to overturn what we thought we knew and understood about God.

Last Sunday evening, Pastor Waggoner of Crosswalk Fellowship gave a thought-provoking sermon at the Baptist Church. He always has many things to say that catch my attention and that challenge me. One thing he said, and I’ve heard it before—maybe you have, too—is that religion is man’s attempt to reach God. Religion is man’s attempt to reach God. I think the Bible bears that out. Think of how often the prophets and psalms talk about the futility of animal sacrifice. Now it was God who instituted animal sacrifice, as you can read in the first five books of the Bible, but it’s clear that we wayward human beings took what God gave us and made it a substitute for what God truly wants most from us: faith, love, devotion, trust, obedience.

What really pushed the Augustinian monk and professor of theology Martin Luther over the edge was seeing the way that the Catholic Church—his church, the church—had lost sight of what God truly wants most from us. They had lost sight of it because, over nearly 1,500 years, the Church had cluttered the message, overlaid the truth with layer upon layer of human gilding. It would be no stretch to say that the Reformers, because of whom we are worshiping here today as Presbyterians, those Reformers, like Jesus, cleansed the Temple.

But that human tendency to gild, to obscure, to forget, and to add is always there. That impulse to buy and sell is always there, to make faith a business transaction, to exchange faith for religion. When we try to sell something, we’re eager to point out all the really attractive and bright features, all the while trying to cover over the features that we’re afraid prospective buyers won’t like. We’re very intent on finding buyers. We’re even sort of desperate to find buyers—not just us, but this denomination, even much of the Church today. We’re convinced we have something really great on offer here, but we find we just don’t seem to have many takers. That scares us. That worries us. With religion, it’s always a buyer’s market. What’s a motivated seller to do? Sweeten the deal, of course.

But what will sweeten the deal? Hide the less attractive parts. Don’t talk about them. Forget about them. Deny them. Don’t say anything that might turn away a buyer. “Well, I like most of it, but I don’t much like that part. Can you leave that out?” Sure! “I and my big checkbook would really like to do business, but I just don’t see it happening until I can get the package I had in mind.” Oh, well, we can make that happen! We used to think of the church as the house of God. Now it’s a marketplace, a place for buying and selling.

And Jesus—sweet, gentle, kind Jesus—makes a huge, loud, angry scene to shock us, get our attention, and to say something to us, quite clearly: stop making my Father’s house a place for buying and selling. Jesus did not come among us looking for customers. He had nothing to sell, and what he is offering we could never buy—what can you give in return for your life? You have nothing of equal value.

Jesus did not come seeking customers but converts, disciples, faithful followers. These are the ones who will take God at His Word. That does not mean that we understand why God says all that He says. It certainly does not mean that we like all that God says. We even sort of wish, in our incomprehension, that God hadn’t said a few things. Yet we still want to follow this God, trustingly, devotedly, hopefully, and we’ll even try to follow obediently, though that is no easy task, even on the best of days! If you were to list your top ten favorite words, can any of you honestly say that obedience would make the list?

It seems quite clear from events all around us, in our society and our culture, that a major change is underway, and it seems as if a lot of people, many church-going Christians among them, see no harm in that change: they regard it as (probably) good. Our denomination is positioning itself, as it has historically for at least the last half century—longer!—to be in line with this change. The PC(USA) talks a good talk about taking a lead in shaping events,

but for the most part we have always just gone along with events, letting others show us the way, accepting the social and cultural story that it’s all good. We eagerly buy what the world is selling: what’s the harm? Aren’t we doing what God told us to do: love our neighbor? Don’t judge?

And then Jesus enters and starts overturning things, causing an uproar and a ruckus, ticking people off. The authorities are quick to confront Jesus, demanding he tell them what authority he has for doing what he’s just done. Whose authority is greater? That’s the question for your lives, each of you. Whose authority is greater—in your life? over your life? Think about that, as you hear and wrestle, and feel confused, and feel stung when the world calls you a hater, and see the reasonableness of what the world is saying, asking, demanding from you—think about this: whose authority is greater?

The sign of the authority Jesus has, he tells them, is this: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). What we miss in translation is that Biblical Greek has at least two words that we just translate as “temple.” One word, the word the authorities use, refers to the physical structure and the precincts, like saying “the temple area.” The other word, the word Jesus uses, might more adequately be translated “the dwelling place of God.” Jesus says this to the authorities who challenge him: destroy this dwelling place of God, and in three days I will raise it up.

But the authorities don’t perceive the distinction, because they are caught up in structures, in what they can touch, and see, and smell, and taste: the physical. Jesus is speaking of the spiritual, what we cannot touch, or see, or smell in itself: faith, love, trust, devotion, obedience. We can’t grasp it, yet we have life in us through it.

And Jesus says something quite striking; he does not say in three days my Father will raise it up. Often in St. John’s account, Jesus speaks of his Father, and so we begin to think of two different beings, Jesus and God. Jesus tells us here, quite plainly if we’re listening, as he does elsewhere in this same Gospel, that he and the Father are one, one God: not my Father will raise it up, but I will raise it up: I will raise up this dwelling place of God, my body. For those who are listening carefully, attentively, Jesus is already telling the authorities that he and the Father are one. On whose authority is Jesus causing all this disturbance? On God’s authority; on his own authority. And whose authority is greater?

What is Jesus doing? His disciples didn’t understand at the time, and we might not quite understand, either. John tells us that they understood afterwards; more: “they believed the Scripture and the Word that Jesus had spoken” (2:22). Sisters and brothers, the world delights in nothing quite so much as confusing us about God. Jesus delights in overturning that confusion, in driving the world out of the Temple, the dwelling place of God.

The Church is the dwelling place of God, but the church is in the world, and it shows. You, each of you, are the dwelling place of God, and if you let him, Jesus will drive the world out of you, too, so that you may be completely what God made you to be: His dwelling place.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!