

Windows On the Word: Jesus in the Temple

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

February 6, 2022-AM Service

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John 2:13-22

The picture for our passage today is on the east side of the sanctuary about halfway to the front. It's there below and to the left of the triumphal entry. If you look up here or at the bulletin cover, you'll see Jesus, braided whip in action. Jesus literally has the high ground in the artwork: He is coming down the steps, on the offensive. The money changer cowers behind his table, coins clattering to the floor. The merchant selling birds holds out his hand to ward off Jesus' attack. If you look closely, you can see something like a bolt of lightning in the yellow pane between Jesus and the merchants. The scene is electric. It's as dynamic as leaded glass can be. It's scary.

In the early 1300s an Italian artist named Giotto painted a fresco of this scene for a family-commissioned chapel in Padua, Italy. It's called "Expulsion of the Merchants." In Giotto's version, two children appear near Peter and John, behind Jesus and his whip. One child buries his face in John's tunic while John puts a hand on the child's back. The other child holds a bird, almost protectively as he leans into Peter's legs. Perhaps, Jesus, such a thing should not be done in front of the children. What is going on here?

An account of Jesus driving out the money changers and merchants appears in all four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it chronologically in Jesus ministry, just where we would expect if we look at the window here: After the triumphal entry, during the week leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. On a purely human level, it certainly seems to be the sort of event that would provoke the Jewish religious authorities.

But John arranges his gospel so that this scene appears at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is as if he wants to refract all of Jesus' ministry and encounters with the religious leaders through this opening story. This confrontation in the temple is a sign Jesus gives through which all of the rest of his ministry should be seen.

It is the week leading up to Passover. The streets of Jerusalem teem with crowds that rival a peak day at Disneyworld. The smell of baking bread and roasted meat wafts through the air. As Jesus approaches the temple, the clink of the coin exchange punctuates the bleating of animals and the hum of family groups on the move. Every Jewish adult male must pay the temple tax, and he must do it in temple-approved currency, free of engraved images. And every family comes to sacrifice an animal for the Passover, according to their means, with a temple-approved animal free of defect.

It's hard to know when it happened exactly, but over time the coin changers and the keepers of flocks and herds overflowed from the street side marketplaces and into the temple courts themselves. It was convenient, really. Why drive your own lamb from Galilee or the Decapolis and risk injuring it on the way?

The argument could be made that the temple merchants and coin exchangers were just providing a service to all those pilgrims: Look how thoughtful they are, providing necessities for sacrifice and offering at a convenient distance. Simplifying the journey for those beleaguered pilgrims who wanted to pack light.

But finding those sellers of oxen and sheep and pigeons, those money changers sitting at their tables—that scene is more than Jesus can take.

Weaving together a whip of ropes, Jesus flicks his wrist and makes contact with the flank of an ox. “Giddyup! Get out of here!” The ox starts and lumbers for the exit, knocking over a birdcage. As the bankers scramble to gather their ledgers and their coins, Jesus starts flipping over tables. “Get this stuff out of here! My Father’s house is not a market!” And though Fortress Antonia is right next door, no soldiers or temple police appear to stop Jesus. The disciples stand nearby, frozen on the spot. Jesus acts alone, one man on an outsized mission. Jesus’ actions point the disciples to the words of Psalm 69:9, with its expectations of a Messiah to come. That servant of God will suffer anguish and derision because: “Zeal for your house will eat me up.” The zeal of Jesus directed toward the merchants and money changers is not a flash of impulsive anger. It is deliberate, purifying, and blazing hot. What about this scene bothers him so much?

Is it that the market squeezes out the non-Jewish believers who have come to worship in the outer court of the Gentiles? Is it that unscrupulous money exchangers or systems were fleecing the worshippers? Maybe. But what is clearest is that Jesus is offended by distractions, dishonor, and even displacement of reverence for the Living God--in the very courts of God’s house! God’s holy temple is being treated contemptibly. What is noisy and commonplace and maybe even corrupt has crept into the place where God lives. “Maybe others could walk past kiosks, cash registers, and blue light specials in the narthex of God’s house and not bat an eye,” Scott Hoezee writes, “but as the very Son of God who himself would soon become the living, walking, breathing temple of God, Jesus took the affront of all this personally.”

Jesus just can’t let it go when such obstacles keep people from seeing the living God. His zeal for his Father’s house will literally eat him alive. What do you think: Do we highlight Gentle Jesus, meek and mild; or do we also see Zealous Jesus, mean and wild?

Although GK Chesterton thought that the image of Christ in the Church of his time was “almost entirely mild and merciful,” he contended that the Gospels offer a more complex portrait of Jesus. Chesterton says “there is nothing meek and mild about the tone of the voice that says, ‘Hold thy peace and come out of him. It is much more like the tone of a very businesslike lion tamer...’” (*The Everlasting Man*, 139-140). Chesterton is right. In fact, the word John uses to refer to Jesus’ driving out the temple occupants is the same word used in other New Testament passages to refer to exorcising a demon.

There’s a reason Jesus is the Savior of sinners and the Merciful Judge is the one the church highlights. We need to know the astonishing depths of God’s mercy. We need to hear it and practice it and live inside it and share it with others every day.

But we also need Jesus convicted, Jesus in command, Jesus strong to deliver from any alien power, to purify and to renew those whom God is drawing near. Maybe we highlight Gentle Jesus because we wonder: What does Jesus’ zeal mean for us as his followers? How would *you* like to work on a group assignment or sit on a township board with someone consciously emulating Zealous Jesus, mean and wild?

No less a Reformer than John Calvin has some guidance on human zeal: “All of us ought to have zeal in common with the Son of God; but all are not at liberty to seize *a whip*, that we may correct vices with our hands; for we have not received the same power, nor have we been entrusted with the same commission.”

We follow Jesus. We are not him. Jesus sees more than we see, he has a call far beyond our own, he has the power to redress wrongs. Some tearing down and building up is reserved for Jesus alone.

But still, what’s a person to do when zeal gets stirred up in her own heart and mind? Because sometimes the Holy Spirit stirs up zeal in us. Shakes us up and gets our attention. Holy

zeal shows us something broken, something wrong. When it rises up in us, we can't help but pay attention.

But trying to address the wrong zeal identifies—ah. That takes wisdom and discernment. And time! When zeal shows up, we need to test our convictions, inclinations and our motives. We test these things, putting them into conversation with Scripture. Exploring them with a wide cloud of witnesses: faithful Christians past and present, near and far. We test them through the lens of Jesus the Crucified One, the one who laid down his life for sinners and enemies.

Perhaps in the temple that day there were some who saw what Jesus did and inwardly cheered. Finally! Someone is *doing* something about the lack of reverence around here! Perhaps some hoped that Jesus would champion their own cause or concern. But everyone watching also knew that Jesus' actions pointed to something else, something more consequential, something that will disrupt everything about life as they've known it. That's why the Jewish leaders ask Jesus for a sign. His actions brought Old Testament Scriptures to the forefront of their minds: Jesus' hearers would have thought of Zechariah 14, telling about day of the Lord: when the Messiah came, no merchant would be found in the temple courts. Or maybe they thought of the first verses of Malachi 3, which says that the Lord they were seeking and waiting for would come suddenly into his temple and give it a cleaning nobody would forget.

Jesus actions aren't just zealous. Jesus is claiming to be God's Anointed One. So the Jews ask: "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this? Can you authenticate your claim with a miracle, Jesus?"¹⁹ Jesus answers, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews look around King Herod's expansive temple, still under construction, and shake their heads. "Sure. It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days? Yeah, right."

The Jews have been left out of the loop—but John's readers are let in on the news: "the temple [Jesus] had spoken of was his body." The new Temple, the place where God dwells, is in Jesus the Son. If the physical structure of Herod's temple is being treated so badly, how much worse might it be for Jesus? This Jesus—God's Lamb—stands in the temple court at Passover prepared to carry away the sin of the world. This Jesus--zealous for the honor of God, and for a people fit to live in the presence of that God --will submit himself to a whip not unlike the one he carried on this day. This Jesus will take upon himself the entire burden of sin, a burden the Temple sacrificial system has been unable to bear.

Of course, at the time, neither the disciples nor the Jewish authorities knew it. John says it was only "after he was raised from the dead [that] the disciples remembered what he had said" about destroying the temple and raising it in three days. And only *after* Jesus' resurrection, John says, "they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken."

Family of God, we all sense how we're living in a time of disruption and change that's as disorienting as any most of us have lived through. Somehow it's reassuring to know that what Jesus was doing in the temple didn't make sense—even to his closest followers—at the moment they lived through it. Think of that. The actions of the most important person the world has ever known, who came to do the most important work that ever could be done on behalf of humanity come clear only in retrospect. It's only looking back through the lens of Jesus' death and resurrection that they recognize Jesus the Messiah: the capital T-temple, *the* purifying presence of God.

Our lives are complicated. Not everything makes sense right now. But God continues to refine and build up his people, his small-t temples, all over the world, in ways that encourage and challenge and give us reasons for hope.

I read a very short account about some Christian students this week. The story never used the word “zeal,” but it is certainly shows up. The Fuller Seminary student body includes members from 90 different countries. After some American students at Fuller heard about deadly attacks by ISIS on Egyptian Christians, they wanted to hold a memorial service in honor of the lives lost. But they went to school with Egyptian classmates. And when the American students talked with the Egyptian students about what they had in mind, the Egyptian students wanted to respond differently.

The Egyptian students viewed the faithfulness of those killed back at home as a reason for celebration. They wanted the worship service to be about “acknowledging what it means to live as a Christian in a context in which you have the privilege of martyrdom.” So together the students planned and held a service of celebration, acknowledging the Acts 5 honor of suffering for the name of Jesus.

That, my friends, is a zeal for the honor of the Crucified Jesus. Because of him we are leaning toward the city that is to come, where the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple, where the glory of God gives us light and the Lamb is the lamp for our way. Thanks be to God.

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