

“Raising the Temple”

John 2:13–22

19 March 2006 – Lent 3B

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

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¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty–six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

Prayer.

I have to admit; I really like our Gospel lesson for today. I love the fact Jesus is kicking in the door of organized religion and turning over the tables. It appeals to my anti–institutional values, the underlying anti–social personality traits I’ve so carefully nurtured all my life.

However, the mere fact that I love this passage is always a sign of caution. Oh, I could go on for days and days about all that is wrong with the Church. Using Jesus’ actions as a poetic license, I could wax eloquently about the problems of Episcopal appointments, ineffective clergy, abuse of power, clergy killing congregations, loss of mission and vision, and rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

After all, I was raised a preacher’s kid. I’ve seen just about everything there is to be seen over the past forty–four years– the good, the bad, and the ugly. But ... where would that get us?

Perhaps a more disciplined approach is necessary.

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I read this past week about the dedication of a beautiful new building on the campus of the University of Oklahoma. It is a beautiful building, complete with all the marvelous accessories needed for a cutting edge academic facility. Wonderful speeches were made to an enthusiastic audience by VIPs, government officials, administrators, and benevolent donors.

Then the young campus minister came to the podium and had a very brief prayer. “Lord burn down this building and scatter these people for the sake of the Gospel.” (as reported by Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001)

I have a feeling this young campus minister understands John 2:13–22 – the narrative of Jesus cleansing the Temple – better than the rest of us.

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this story at the end of Jesus’ life giving the impression that this scene takes place right before his passion and crucifixion, the Gospel of John places this narrative right at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. John wants us to know who Jesus really is, right from the start. Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Son of God, the Light of the world, the master over all things, including the Lord of the Temple.

When the Jewish authorities ask him “What sign can you show us for doing this?” (v.18) Jesus makes a subtle but significant metaphorical move. He is the “Temple” that will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. Jesus is supplanting the Temple as the primary means whereby we are brought close to God. He is calling us to redirect our allegiances – from the old ways of organized religion – to a new and direct relationship with God himself, through Jesus the Son.

With Jesus, following the rules is less important than being his friend. Adhering to doctrine, polity, and laws are less important than a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. There are a lot of church authorities to this day that will preach this on Sunday, but go back to living the old ways on Monday – and live this hypocritical lifestyle for the rest of the week.

When we relate directly with Jesus, we follow his commands, his teaching, his practices. This means that while a personal relationship with Jesus is the foundation of a Christian life, an important and necessary premise is yet another metaphorical shift.

In his physical absence, we've been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are called to work together, cooperatively and collaboratively, ordering ourselves just like the early Christian Apostles and churches. By the gift of the Spirit, the shift is made that we have now become the Body of Christ, the new "Temple" connection through which Christ relates to the world.

It is not enough to be a believer, a person of faith, and to live in isolation, in the absence of a community of faith. The new "Temple" isn't made of stone, bricks and mortar, steel or wood. The new "Temple" is us - we are the Body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. Working together we can deepen our personal relationship with Christ, and be more effective to bring about his mission.

Although we would like to get together to host more fund raisers to help raise the church budget, isn't it quite obvious that these are the very tables Jesus seeks to overturn and disrupt? Fund raising for our own sake is nothing more than attempting to be a Christian on the cheap - what we can earn is all the less I'll have to pay out of my own pocket. Those with this attitude need to have their tables overturned.

However, when we are **driven by the mission** of Christ, when we **follow the mind** of Christ, when we **become the heart** of Christ, then **we are living with integrity as Christ's own disciples.**

The mission of Christ has nothing to do with partisan politics. But it has everything to do with changing society, establishing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. The mind of Christ has little concern for debates about social issues, but it does have everything to do with reaching out to the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, outcasts, and prisoners. The heart of Christ has nothing to do with power, status, or wealth. It has to do with giving away everything - pride, ego, status, money - everything, and allowing ourselves to be filled wholly, completely with nothing other than Jesus himself.

We can't be filled up with Christ until we are first made empty.

One of the hallmark characteristics of the season of Lent is to allow ourselves to being drawn into behaviors of self-denial. The season presents us with the question, "what can I give up or do without, that will pull me closer to Jesus?" This attitude recognizes the fact that there are

many things in life that serve as barriers, as stumbling blocks, as impediments to a life lived in close relationship with Jesus.

Pride, power, arrogance, greed ... these are the tables Jesus is looking to overturn, either in the Church, in the larger society, or in our personal lives. This is the substance that needs to be drained out and removed from our lives.

But self-denial is only one half of the equation. Lent calls us to be willing vessels. The other half of the equation has to do with a willingness to being filled with Christ, to allow Jesus to have his way with us, to let ourselves become the hands, mind, and heart of Jesus himself.

Justice, peace, compassion, and love ... these are the tables Jesus is seeking to set up in their place, both in the Church and in our personal lives. This is the substance of what Jesus intends to pour into our lives, to fill up the empty space.

Being the Body of Christ, we are certainly bound to suffer with Christ, to die, and three days later, to be risen from the dead with him. There is no way to get to Easter without first living through Lent and Holy Week. This building that so many people refer to as a "church," well, a fire or tornado can raise this temple to the ground tomorrow, but it wouldn't affect the Church one iota.

The Church is the people, the Body of Christ, with each of the constituent members a disciple of Jesus. If we don't empty ourselves, then look to Jesus to overturn a few tables in our lives. For those of us who do, who take advantage of self-denial this season of Lent, we know that the prospects of being filled with Jesus will make tomorrow a better day.

Tomorrow will be a better day because we will have followed through with our commitments as Jesus' disciples. We will labor in the vineyard to overcome poverty, injustice, and violence. We will have worked with each other, worked hand in hand, to do our part to help establish the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Though we will suffer temptation and sin, tomorrow will be a better day. Christ atones us of our sins, washes us clean by his blood. Though tomorrow we may open death's uncertain door, we will walk through to the other side to embrace resurrection, and take our place at Christ's heavenly banquet.

Jesus is coming to church this morning, but he isn't carrying a cloth covered, zippered Bible. He is wielding a whip. Things could get a little bit dicey. What tables will he be overturning in your life? Just how much are you prepared to give him?

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.