

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
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When the Tables Turn

John 2:13-22

I can't count how many times I have heard this story interpreted as Jesus angrily cleansing the temple of corruption. But I wonder about that here in John. Yes, Jesus appears to be angry. You don't make a whip of cords and drive people out of a room just for the fun of it. And I don't doubt that some of the traders were corrupt. In light of the current crisis on Wall Street, that seems to be a safe assumption. However, not all Wall Street traders are corrupt. We would be wrong to say so. But that some were is beyond question. Still, should we assume that Jesus was angry about corruption in the Temple market? Or might he have had something else in mind?

To begin the people believed the Temple was the house of God. It was the center of worship, the anchor of stability. The practice of selling sacrificial animals and changing money was long established. It was in fact a service that permitted faithful Jews from around the world to make offerings and sacrifices in the Temple without having to bring their animals with them over long distances. Even though they were under Roman rule, the Temple stood as a strong symbol of Jewish identity. Most of the people didn't consider it exploitative or problematic.

The temple was also "the national bank [of Judea]; it collected tithes, and Jewish men age twenty and older [paid] the Temple tax."¹ As such the Temple is symbolic of the way things ought to be, an emblem of the way of life everybody has grown up with. So Jesus' attack on the Temple represents far more than a simple house cleaning. To be sure he may have been protesting the use of the outer courts for a marketplace. Why else would John quote him as saying, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" But it is far more likely that he was prophetically announcing that God was establishing a new covenant with the people, a covenant not centered in the temple in Jerusalem, but centered in Jesus, the Messiah.

Remember Jesus' conversation with the woman of Samaria who met him at the well? That occurs later in this same gospel, but it may help us understand something of this event. In the course of that conversation the woman said, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus replied, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. [Jn 4:19-23]

Remember too the vision of St. John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;' ... "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." [Rev 21:1-4, 22]

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 154

Notice, no temple in the city, but the presence everywhere of God and the Lamb, who we know was Jesus. This story of Jesus in the Temple isn't so much about cleansing the temple of corruption; it's about announcing the dawn of a new day, a new day of God's presence with the people, a new way of worshiping God in spirit and in truth. It's a way of worship, a way of life that is not bound to a place or a sacrificial system, but to a vital relationship with the living God.

A few years ago First Presbyterian Church of Naples completely leveled its sanctuary and educational facility. It did that in order to build a new facility. Same's true of Moorings Presbyterian Church. Their new sanctuary was built on the site of the old one. In order to do that, the old one had to be demolished. In like manner, in order to make way for a new way of relating to God, the old way has to be dismantled. That is what Jesus was up to in this scenario. The difference is that Jesus was not going to build a new building so he didn't need to tear the old one down. Instead, Jesus was bent on changing the way people thought about God, the way they worshiped, their whole way of life. The new temple, according to Jesus, would be his body, the body of Christ raised from the dead. What else are we to make of his claim that if the Temple were destroyed, he would rebuild it in three days?

No wonder the priests and authorities opposed him. No surprise there. Their whole livelihood depended on the Temple remaining as it was. A new temple or a new approach to worshiping God was a threat. Further, they only saw Jesus as a man, perhaps even as a madman. They did not recognize God at work in and through him. For that matter, his own disciples did not know that until after the resurrection. But then, looking back, they realized what he had said and done as fulfillment of Scripture. They remembered that it was written in the Psalms, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

You and I are living through a very tumultuous time, a time when the tables of the money changers have been overturned, a time when the traders have been chastised and driven out of the Temple. No, I'm not speaking of the church, although the church is caught up in the transformation as well. Nevertheless, remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of the economy. Some nowadays will, like the priests of Jesus' day, see this economic crisis as a merely human event, perhaps even the work of a few mad men, a human failure of the great financial minds of our day. But it's also possible to see the hand of God at work, acting in a public way to announce the end of the old order and the beginning of a new one.

Those who see only human error, human action, have little hope for the future. The future will by necessity be different and nobody knows quite what it will be like. But for the moment they will feel great anxiety and uncertainty, even fear. But those who see the hand of God at work in the current situation need not be afraid. They can have hope for the future. For they can see God leading us into a new future, a new way of economic well-being. Come to think of it, Jesus' disciples didn't have a clue to what Jesus was talking about when he said he would raise the temple up in three days. Like those disciples who were with Jesus in the Temple that day, we do not know what the future holds. But we do know who holds the future in his hands. When the new day comes, we will be able to look back, as they did, and see more clearly how God was at work in the midst of all the turmoil.

For now, you and I are called to walk in the knowledge of God that has been given to us, that God has plans for us, plans for our welfare and not plans to harm. Don't be afraid. God is at work in this world transforming it day by day into the new world God is creating. Trust that God is at work transforming the world in which we live, bringing ever nearer the kingdom of God that Jesus promised. When the tables of life are turned, take a closer look at what God is up to. Place your faith, not in the Temple, but in the God who calls you his beloved children.