

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
March 3, 2024 – The Third Sunday in Lent  
John 2:13-22 – Jesus and the Temple Money Changers  
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We just heard an account of a memorable event in Jesus' life, one that has captured the imagination of many artists, Jesus' confrontation with the money changers in the Temple in Jerusalem. To appreciate this event, we need some background information.

It was Passover, a week-long spring festival when the Jewish people celebrated the Exodus: when God had acted through Moses to liberate the Jews from slavery in Egypt centuries before. Passover was one of the yearly occasions when people were expected to make every effort they could to go to Jerusalem and worship at the Temple. Animal sacrifice was part of that worship, and animals that were unblemished and therefore acceptable for sacrifice were sold at the Temple. Imagine that you had to travel some distance to Jerusalem. It would be much more practical to buy the animal you would offer for sacrifice there than to bring it with you on your journey. There was also a Temple tax of a half-shekel, the required offering to the Lord specified in the book of Exodus. This had to be paid to enter the Temple, and foreign currencies had to be exchanged for this half-shekel. That is what the money changers did.

Many of us have been taught that what Jesus was so angry about was that the animal sellers and money changers were taking advantage of their position to exploit the people coming to worship and make an unfair profit. There is no reason to assume this. The people who sold animals and exchanged currency were doing jobs that were legitimate and necessary according to the religious customs of the time.

Note that in John's Gospel this event is recorded in the second chapter, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and it is his first public appearance. By placing this event as he has, John is highlighting its significance. In this brief event Jesus is making two points that are very important, points which challenged the religious authorities about their understanding of God and the Temple and their interpretation of God's teaching.

In the translation we just heard Jesus refers to the Temple as a "marketplace," but we may be more familiar with the translation "den of thieves" or "den of robbers." The den of robbers is a place where robbers go to be safe, to escape and avoid being caught. This phrase refers to a passage from the prophet Jeremiah (7:9-11) in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus and the religious authorities knew the reference. In it, God says, "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house,

which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe' – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord." We can apply this warning to the church today. We must not regard the church as a place where we seek refuge from the consequences of our sinful behavior without any real intent to reform or change. God is not deceived by this. In Lent we are reminded that God desires our true repentance, not empty words.

The second important point is that in this event and his dialogue with the Jews who witnessed it, Jesus challenges people to shift their idea of where God is, where God is located, from the Temple that took forty-six years to build to himself, "the temple of his body" that would be raised from the dead three days after his death. It is difficult for us to imagine how astounding – even blasphemous – this idea was at the time because, as Christians, we are very familiar with the idea that God is present in Jesus. In this exchange, as in many others to come, Jesus is questioning the entire religious system of his time, and that is not often well-received.

I think this morning's lesson from John may serve to caution us in the church and remind us that our focus needs to be on Jesus, on God. The church needs to point to God, to be a living witness to Christ, to be Christ's hands and heart in this world. We must not turn the church into an idol, an end in itself, merely a human institution with religious rituals that come to take the place of the living God with whom we are in relationship. The idea of the Temple or the church becoming an idol brings us to consider our Old Testament reading.

In this lesson from Exodus we find the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue. God is speaking these words to Moses, who will then convey them to the people of Israel. These commandments are the foundation of the covenant between God and God's people. There are no punishments stated here for breaking the commandments. The people are supposed to obey them, not from fear of punishment, but because they come from God and because the people want to live in accordance with God's will. The items in the Decalogue are arranged into two groups. Duties to God come first. The second group contains duties toward fellow humans, which are depicted as being of equal concern to God.

As we know from reading the Gospel of Mark (12:29-31), Jesus used a passage from the book of Deuteronomy and one from the book of Leviticus - both very familiar to the Jewish people – and gave us what we call the Two Great Commandments. "The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other

commandment greater than these.” Today we will look at the first Great Commandment and next week we will look at the second.

In the Ash Wednesday service we are invited to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance. I would suggest that we use the first Great Commandment to examine our way of living. This commandment tells us that we are to love God with all of ourselves, with every gift God has given us, all the time. We might ask ourselves if what we do and what we think can be done and thought “for the love of God.” As one writer puts it, “There is nothing we can justify doing if it means not loving God above all else and with all that we are.”

I am not suggesting that we are to live serious, pious lives with no pleasure, as some religious sects advocate. Scripture tells us that God delights in creation – as the psalmist says, “Yonder is the great and wide sea with its living things too many to number, creatures both small and great. There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan, which you have made for the sport of it” (Psalm 104:26-27). And Jesus enjoyed dinner parties so much that he had a reputation among some serious religious people for being a glutton and a drunkard! Our lives aren’t supposed to be “all work and no play” either. God commanded Sabbath rest, and Jesus left the crowds whom he taught and healed to be alone and pray. The purpose of self-examination and repentance in the light of the Great Commandments is not to live miserably, but to live more by God’s ways, ways which are life-enhancing, peaceful, and joyful.

Self-examination is a spiritual practice, which means it takes practice. We can’t begin by examining every minute of our lives, or every thought, or every action. We need to start on a smaller scale. Some people take time at the end of every day to think back on the day. Last week I shared with you St. Ignatius’ Prayer of Examen, which is one guide for looking prayerfully back on the day just past. Or we might ask these general questions: “How and when did I love God above all else today? How and when did I fail to love God today?” We might also use self-examination in light of the first Great Commandment when we face a decision, e.g. “How will I love God by doing X compared to Y?” There are many ways to engage in this spiritual practice.

The goal of self-examination and repentance is to live our lives in ever closer conformity to our faith; in other words, to become less hypocritical and more authentically Christian, closer followers of Jesus. In the words of one of my favorite Gospel songs: “I can’t go to church and shout all day Sunday and go out and get drunk and raise hell on Monday. I’ve got to live the life I sing about in my songs.” May God give us the grace to live our faith, to live with love, day by day. Amen.