

“Cleansing The Temple”

Liturgical Date: Lent 3 (B)

Primary Text: St. John 2:13-22

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Third Sunday in Lent, is the Holy Gospel from St. John Chapter 2. The title of the sermon is, “Cleansing The Temple.”

What we heard about today in the Gospel reading is an interesting event in the life of Jesus. Many people often like to think of a meek and mild Jesus. And there are certainly times when He displayed His “softer side”. We think of the image of the good shepherd finding the one lost sheep and returning with it on His shoulders. Of smiling and welcoming the little children to come sit with Him. Of the Jesus having compassion on those struggling and healing them. But the Jesus that we heard about today kind went bezerk, it would seem. He shows up at this holy place of the temple and gets angry. He makes a whip and literally drives people and animals out of the temple. And He isn’t done yet. He scatters about the coins of the money-changers and then literally throws over tables.

Of course, the Jesus that had compassion on thousands of hungry people and miraculously fed them is the same Jesus who cleanses the temple in this big scene and would later call His opponents “vipers” and “whitewashed tombs.” Jesus was a very strong and forceful person and at the same time a very compassionate and kind man. All of times that He acted and spoke, He did so without sinning because He was perfect and without the stain of sin. So, what was it that caused Jesus to become so upset as to do what He did in our Gospel text?

First, it would be helpful to set the scene. St. John tells us that this is the time of the Passover, which is the highest of the high feasts for the Jews. Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke also account Jesus cleansing the temple, but their

accounts come later chronologically in the Gospels, at the beginning of Holy Week. Some see John's account as "out of order", but it is best understood that Jesus cleansed the temple twice-once at the beginning of His ministry as relayed here in John, and once toward the end as recounted by the other Gospel writers. Regardless, with it being Passover Jerusalem and the temple are humming with activity. Jewish pilgrims have come from far and wide for the feast and they need to make a sacrifice at the temple. There are a lot of animals and money that is changing hands. For these merchants, you could say that is the equivalent of "Black Friday" shopping season for them.

It was not that the fact there were those selling animals for sacrifice and money changers at the temple that was wrong. Indeed, some have tried to use this text to say no group in a congregation should ever ask for money or do a fundraiser on church grounds. But that is not the proper application of the text. The animal-sellers and money changers did serve a purpose. We even see this happening in the Old Testament without incident. The pilgrims could not usually practically travel to Jerusalem with the animals they needed, so thus it was needed that they could purchase sacrificial animals at the temple and those selling them should be able to be compensated for what they sold. Additionally, some of these pilgrims came from regions that did not use the same money. So, like when you travel to another country, they also needed to exchange their money to the local currency. Furthermore, to pay the required temple tax as mandated in Old Testament Law they must use money without human images on it. Roman money had those images and needed to be exchanged for Jewish shekels.

Then what is the problem? Why does our Lord end up chasing people and animals out with a whip, slinging money on the ground, and overturning tables? It is because as Luther described about this passage, "crass commercialism." What these necessary exchanges had evolved into was blatant profiteering and price

gouging. A holy place had essentially turned into a flea market or auction that trivialized the holy and commanded acts that needed to take place there. The temple was run by the Sadducees, and they also received a nice commission on what was sold. The temple system was one of gouging and money-hungry commercialism that a fair-minded person knew was wrong. Thus, enter Jesus and it was time to make a statement. To cleanse, to purge, the temple of this sin. This is why He said in verse 16, *“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”* The disciples recalled Psalm 69:9 in verse 17, *“Zeal for your house will consume me.”* This was not anger for anger’s sake. It was as Luther wrote, *“Zeal is an angry love or jealous love...His anger does not arise from hatred; it springs from...love toward God.”*

While we think, “You go Jesus. Get them. Teach them a lesson”, we must also examine our own hearts. The Bible says our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. What does Jesus need to cleanse from our temples? No doubt, it is plenty, is not? Have we put money on a pedestal, and either been stingy in giving to the Lord’s work, or hoarding it, or overcharging people because we think it “won’t hurt anything”? And I think we can even take this a little more broadly than just sins dealing with money. What wicked thoughts and desires need to be cleansed from our temples? What idols have we constructed, anything that we have put above God, that need to be torn down, scattered, overturned, and driven out?

Now obviously this scene got people’s attention. It speaks to the authority and presence that Jesus had. That one man, even one with a whip, could clear such a large and chaotic scene says a lot. After Jesus did what He did, He was-as He often was, questioned by the Jewish leaders. From verse 18, *“What sign do you show us for doing these things?”* If anything, what had just happened was an indictment of the religious leaders. They were the ones who oversaw the temple

and allowed this greedy system to go on. And Jesus had just made the quite the statement about that.

The answer that Jesus gives to their demand for a sign (as 1 Corinthians 1 said the “Jews demand a sign”) was rather interesting. One that they did not understand, but was profound. Verse 19, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*” You can almost see their heads shaking with their follow up to Jesus’ answer, “*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?*”

Indeed, Herod the Great had begun building that temple decades earlier. It was quite the project. Much of it was completed by the time of Jesus’ ministry, but construction would actually continue all the way until 64 AD. Gold and marble were used liberally in the construction. The colonnades were white marble, 40 feet high, each carved out of a single piece of stone. There were four courtyards, one each for priests, Jewish men, women, and then the outer court that Gentiles could enter. The temple area was surrounded by walls 1,000 feet long on each side, the whole area was the size of 25 football fields or 4 city blocks. Very large. Very impressive. And Jesus is saying He could destroy all of this and rebuild it in 3 days. They may have thought Jesus was a little crazy after what He had just done and spoke.

But just as verses 21-22 told us, Jesus is not referring to the physical temple in Jerusalem, but the temple of His body. That temple would be destroyed by the smiting, the flogging, the nails, and the spear. And actually, the temple they were standing at that day would also be destroyed. Only 6 years after it was fully completed, the Romans would entirely destroy it during the Jewish rebellion of AD 70. And it would never be rebuilt to this very day. Only ruins remain and a Muslim Mosque stands atop the temple mount. However, the temple of Jesus’ body would be raised again-very literally. On the third day after they took his

lifeless body down from the cross, Jesus would emerge from the garden tomb very much alive. As verse 22 stated, the disciples at that point would understand what Jesus was talking about.

And as incredible as a man dying and then rising from the dead is, it is what that accomplished that is even better. No animals would need to be purchased for sacrifice anymore. No money changers would be needed to pay a temple price. In fact, no physical temple would be needed at all. Because Jesus, the perfect God-man in dying paid the penalty for sin, fully paying the sin debt for all eternity that no animal could atone for. He was the spotless Lamb of God. The sacrificial system and its temple all pointed to Him. With the cross and empty tomb, it would all be fulfilled.

God's dwelling place, His temple would now be directly in His people. That's you. That's me. The temple was cleansed in our text today. Sin was driven out from God's presence. In the cross God has banished and defeated sin. And the true temple of Christ Jesus and His body has been raised up. It is still standing and still saving today. Thanks be to God!

The peace of God, that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.