

Today's passage is one that we find in all four gospel accounts. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have it taking place when Jesus enters Jerusalem during holy week. The account we are reading today is from the gospel of John, who places the cleansing of the temple early in Jesus' ministry, right after the wedding at Cana. This difference in location and even timeline of events is significant to the writers themselves but for us it merely highlights the way Jesus was understood by his disciples and how we have come to understand him over time. Let us hear God's word to us this day from John 2:13-22.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup> Making 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. <sup>16</sup> He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." <sup>18</sup> The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." <sup>20</sup> The Jews

then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> After 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

This story is often used to proclaim Jesus’ dissatisfaction with the money changers and livestock vendors who have positioned themselves and their livestock in the temple courtyard. But, Jesus doesn’t say that. It is a logical assumption since his anger seems to turn toward those benefiting from the selling of goods and the changing of money in the temple. But even as logical as it may seem to us we don’t know for sure. And, knowing John, there’s always a little mystery and more than meets the eye. So if we don’t know exactly what Jesus was thinking or had in mind in this moment it’s worth examining options, options that may fit more clearly in line with the Jesus we get to know more intimately later in John’s gospel and throughout the synoptics.

The first story in John, the wedding at Cana is a private event, this event that follows immediately after, is a very public event. It takes Jesus’

ministry from directly in front of the disciples to all the people. It is likely that this marketplace that was set up in the temple courts was in the area where the gentiles were allowed to come and pray, this means they would not have been allowed to enter any further into the temple, and this marketplace, with animals bleating and mooing and coin jingling in purses was the closest place they could be to the presence of God, all while under the watchful eye of temple authorities.

An underlying tension in this story that is not named and doesn't rise to clear parallels because of where it resides in John is the relationship between the religious authorities, those who run and oversee the temple, those who enact the religious rites for people, with the Roman authorities. This relationship was so intertwined it was impossible to separate. The temple relied on the empire and the empire relied on the temple. Their working together was to their own advantage in large part because it increased revenue for the empire and kept those in appointed leadership positions safe from being dismissed. When we start to think of this story in that light we begin to see why it is that Jesus may have been so upset.

He is so enraged that we get Jesus' first enactment of prophetic voice in John. He speaks for God, recalling the psalm proclaiming "zeal for your house will consume me," and in so declares that the temple should not be

made into a marketplace. But who is allowing it to be this? Who is encouraging these vendors and money changers to be in this space? What he is ultimately doing is declaring that the temple should not be linked with the empire, that the imperial rule should not be the rule of God's house. This, of course can be taken to extremes when viewed in isolation from other of Jesus' acts, the extreme would be denying any sort of responsibility to the law of the land, and to civic responsibility. But, when taken in totality of Jesus' ministry, we see that is not his point. Jesus is demonstrating that access to God should be available to all, that purchasing an overpriced animal for sacrifice, even though you may have brought your own animal from home, is not at all what God wishes for God's people. Gatekeeping is being used as a tool of the relationship between the religious institution and the imperial state where pockets are lined in both institutions. And, it is the followers, the believers, God's people who are left to pay the price for access to their God.

This would be like if today as you walked we had people selling bread and juice in the narthex and telling you the only way you can participate in communion today is if you provide your own bread and juice, but the bread and juice you might bring from home isn't the right bread or juice so you must buy from the people we've invited to sell in the narthex. But, their

prices aren't the same as what you paid for your own supplies. No they've increased significantly, because they are going to pay us some of their profit and then we of course are going to pay the ruling government to make sure they stay happy with us and keep letting us stay in our roles as leaders of this church. If you can't buy our bread and juice then sorry, no communion for you. You've made this long trip here and can't participate in the service.

This abuse of power and position and disenfranchisement of those who seek relationship with God to the point that they cannot participate in the religious life seems more likely to be the thing Jesus is angry about, not those who are required participants in this system. And, quite frankly those who are the vendors and money changers may even believe they are doing what is right, they are providing a way for people to exchange their money to have the temple coins that are acceptable to God, and they are ensuring people have access to animals that are unblemished so their sacrifice will not be in vain. But, sometimes even when we think we're doing what is right, when we drill down a little more we realize it may not really come from God at all.

So what Jesus is doing is shifting the understanding of relationship with God away from the power of religious leaders. We don't hear John use

the phrase 'abide in me' in this particular passage but throughout John this idea that our faith abides in the body, in the body of Christ in particular, is prevalent. It moves us away from a focus on the physical temple structure as the place where God dwells and where all holy activity must take place and instead shifts us toward the individual body as the temple, the place where God dwells and through which all holy activity should originate.

This shift takes away control from the religious authority and decentralizes the need to abide by the rules of the imperial powers and temple leaders, instead giving authority to each individual to be in direct relationship with God. And, while this understanding and revelation was being newly understood, I don't believe it was actually new. Throughout all of history God had direct relationship with people, from creation, through slavery and freedom out of slavery, through the prophets, and exile, so God's relationship with people is not new. It was being revealed in a new way. But I want to be careful here to emphasize: this revelation does not mean the relationship the Jewish people had or have with God is any different than what we claim to have with God in terms of intimate relationship, it means it was not understood in the same way we understand it today.

As we end this pericope, John clarifies Jesus' meaning when he said, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' It is his body that he speaks of, not the physical temple. This is crucial for the evolving community of Jesus followers. It opens the door to a more inclusive community that is embodied through the indwelling of Christ in each person. This too would have been a difficult concept to grasp in the socio-religious environment of the day and even the disciples, though they had come to belief in Jesus as he turned water to wine in Cana, did not grasp what it was Jesus meant until after his death and resurrection. John's emphasis on the spiritual presence of God is a drastic movement away from the widely held understanding of God living in a physical place. The beginning of Jesus' ministry for John is a very public call to change in the two ruling institutions of the day: the Roman empire and the Temple authority.

These shifts in cultures are hard, they're hard even just in families, or churches and Jesus' prophetic teachings, like this one, that called for a major cultural shift, is ultimately one of the reasons Jesus caught the attention of the religious and imperial authorities and was killed.

Last week we looked at what it means for individuals to truly follow Christ. Today we see what it means for institutions, what will become to us, churches, to follow Christ.

In this season of Lent we are invited to reflect not only on our own lives, the places where we should repent and turn toward God but also on the life of the institution that is the church. How is the church living out God's call to serve and empower people in their faith journey? How are we as members of and participants in the institution continuing to draw nearer to God in all our ministries? Where do we need to repent? Where is it that we are the cause of separation for God and God's people? May Jesus, through the indwelling of Christ, and the call of the Holy Spirit continue to call us out of the actions and ways of thinking that separate any one person from the presence of God in this place and in the world. Amen.