

## “My Father’s House”

John 2:13-22

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

March 7, 2021 • The Third Sunday of Lent

Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem; he causes a major disturbance, his authority is challenged, and he utters a prophetic word about his own nature and destiny. It is the “cleansing of the temple,” a story told in all four gospels. This is John’s version, which contains some details and nuances that Matthew, Mark, and Luke don’t mention, and which give rise to a few questions that have never been fully answered to everyone’s satisfaction. The story also leads to some important spiritual or theological questions that every Christian really ought to ponder. There’s a lot to talk about here!

“The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” This story occurs early in John’s gospel; we are only in chapter two. Most of Jesus’ ministry takes place after this story. Indeed, the way John tells the story, *two whole years will pass* between Jesus cleansing the temple and his execution. How do we know that? Because John tells us that Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and there are *two more Passovers* that take place in the gospel of John after this one. Passover was an annual event, like our Easter. These Passover references in John’s gospel suggest that the time between Jesus’ baptism and his crucifixion was somewhere between two and three years. The puzzle comes in when we look at the timing of this story in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In those three gospels, Jesus cleanses the temple on his *final* visit to Jerusalem, almost at the very end of his ministry, after the events that we recall on Palm Sunday. In those gospels, this story serves as one of the catalysts that leads – in just a matter of days – to his arrest and execution. But not in John. In John’s version, Jesus is allowed to safely leave Jerusalem, and continue his ministry for two more whole years.

Readers of the Bible have wondered about this seeming discrepancy for many, many centuries. A traditional interpretation is that similar events happened twice. That’s the view held by St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, for example. But other interpreters question whether it’s realistic to think that virtually the same actions could have happened twice. When somebody creates a major disruption in a sacred space, doesn’t it seem reasonable to think that steps would be taken to make sure that person could never do that again? This isn’t the only major difference in timing between what John says and what the other three gospels say; in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is crucified on the day of Passover; in John, Jesus is crucified in the afternoon just *before* Passover – when the Passover lamb was sacrificed. They can’t *both* be right, at least not from a historical perspective. But it seems to be the case that John was far more interested in conveying *theology* than he was in conveying *history*. He was far more interested that we come to have *life* in the name of Jesus Christ than he was in writing an orderly account of specific events in a linear fashion. Does it really *matter* if this event took place near the beginning or the end of Jesus’ ministry? Isn’t it much more important to think about what it *means*?

“In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated

at their temples.” Why would people be selling animals here? What business would money changers have in the temple? Now you have to remember that the temple area was *huge*. There was a temple building, which was surrounded by a very large plaza on the temple mount – about 37 acres all together, the equivalent of about 30 football fields. You have to envision a space much, *much* larger than a typical church building. The cattle, sheep, and doves were all here because the temple was a place of animal sacrifice; these animals would be offered up to God on the altar in front of the temple building, according to all those instructions in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Someday I need to come up with a simple way to explain all of that. Jews would travel from far and wide to come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple. If the distance was great, it would be easier for a person to just buy an animal when they arrived in Jerusalem, than it would to bring the animal with them. Poor people were allowed to offer doves or pigeons instead of large animals. So people would come to the temple, some of them bringing their own animals, but many of them bringing money, to buy animals for the sacrifice. People also brought money to pay the temple tax. But Greek and Roman coins could not be used, because they contained graven images, or pagan symbols; someone arriving in Jerusalem with imperial money would need to convert their coin into local currency that did not bear such images. So, merchants would “set up shop” on the temple precincts, some selling cattle and sheep, others selling doves, still others offering currency exchange, making a little profit in the process.

Jesus finds all this objectionable. “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.” Only John mentions the whip, which Jesus might have made from rushes that were used as bedding material for the animals. All four gospels agree that Jesus drove out all the merchants, both the animal sellers and the money changers. This was not a small feat; there were probably a number of these merchants, and who knows how many large animals and caged birds. This was not Jesus being diplomatic; Jesus evidently made no effort to try to *persuade* these people to leave peaceably. He just simply *forced* them all out. It gives rise to some significant questions. Did Jesus get *violent*? What did he use the *whip* for – did he use it just on the *animals*, or on the *people* too? How much *force* did he use when he overturned the tables? I’ll come back to those questions later on.

“He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!’” Or, more literally: “stop making *the house of my father* into a *house of commerce*. Jesus’ objection is that the *purpose* of this sacred house has been perverted. *The worship of God* has been replaced – at least to an extent – with *commercial enterprise*. There were people who were making a living off of buying and selling animals or exchanging currency in the temple. These people may not have been making a fortune – there’s nothing to indicate that they were charging exorbitant prices, or getting rich off of this. One would assume that the vendors offering the best deals would tend to get the most business, which would keep the merchants in constant competition with one another. The problem seems to be that this activity was taking place *on the temple grounds*. Would Jesus have been happier if this business had been happening *outside* the entrances to the temple precincts? Or did he object to the fact that it was happening *at all*? It is just the *location* of these practices that was at issue – or the fact that the temple system in Jerusalem seemed to *necessitate* the *existence* of these practices? If it’s the latter, then what did Jesus think *should* be happening instead?

I do not have good answers to these questions. Jesus’ true desires, here and in some other gospel stories, are elusive. We just don’t know what he was thinking, except when he tells us explicitly.

“His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’” That’s a quotation from Psalm 69; the idea is that Jesus was consumed with passion for the house of God. “The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’” By “the Jews,” John means “the Jewish leaders;” they want Jesus perform some sort of miraculous act, to prove to them that he has some kind of *divine right* to do what he has done. Jesus does not give them a miraculous sign – which he could have done, had he wished. Instead, he offers a cryptic sentence with a double meaning: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jewish leaders think he is talking about the temple in Jerusalem, where they are standing, the sanctity of which Jesus evidently cares a great deal about. Jesus seems to be saying that if that temple were destroyed, he could rebuild it – in a mere three days. The Jewish leaders are incredulous: “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” To be clear – this temple in Jerusalem had existed for more than 500 years (it was the second one built on that site), but we know from other historical sources that it had fallen into disrepair, and so Herod the Great had embarked on a massive renovation and expansion effort, beginning in about the year 19 BC. Add 46 years to that, and you arrive at about 27 AD, a few years before Jesus’ death, which was probably in the year 30. That math adds up very nicely.

But let’s not get distracted by that detail. Jesus wasn’t talking about the Jerusalem temple, a temple made of stone and built with human hands. Jesus “was speaking of the temple of his body,” the flesh and blood in which his soul was dwelling – a body that would be “destroyed,” so to speak, on Good Friday, and rise triumphantly on Easter morn. It is significant that Jesus says “I will raise it up.” Some verses in the New Testament say that *God* raised Jesus from the dead. Here, Jesus suggests that it is *Jesus himself* who does that. We should remember that, in John, Jesus and God “are one.” (John 10:30)

So this story contains some mysteries that we may never have good answers to. But it also contains some significant spiritual or theological questions that every Christian really needs to ponder.

First: the purpose of a house of worship to God should never be compromised. “The Father’s house” should never become a “house of commerce.” But does that mean we should never sell anything? No cookbooks? No fair trade coffee? No CD’s? *Where is the line* that we should not cross?

Second: when is it permissible – in the eyes of God – to resort to violence? Jesus “made a whip of cords” and “drove them out.” How violent did he get? Did he *hurt* anybody? Jesus is the “Prince of Peace,” but he also said “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34) So if Jesus can take up a whip and, it would seem, a sword, under what circumstances should *Christians* take up arms?

Third: *where do we find the presence of God?* For many centuries, Jews believed that God’s presence resided *in the temple*, in Jerusalem. It was a *sacred* place, a *holy* place; Jews believed it was the most sacred site in the whole world. But Jesus tells us that the temple that *really* matters is not *that* building, nor *any* building made with human hands. The temple that really matters, the “place” where God resides most fully, is *in Jesus himself*. Yet we Christians still give a special weight to our sacred shrines: our churches and cathedrals. Does the presence of God somehow “reside” in these places? How essential is a *building* for the ongoing ministry of the church? Where do we find God, *really*?

This story is filled with passion. Jesus clearly felt something *precious* and *holy* was at stake. Yet a close look at this passage seems to give us more questions than answers. I wish I could tell you, *here’s what this means for us*. I can’t do that. We’re just going to have to keep listening for Jesus to guide us.

© 2021 Rev. Bill Pinches