

“The Temple of His Body”

John2:13-22; 1Corinthians1:18-25

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. (Psalm 19:14) Amen

(That’s the concluding verse of today’s Psalm, and is spoken by Pastor Sonja and many others to start sermons.)

To start this sermon: this is about Jesus.

Maybe that would seem obvious, because I talk about little else. But let’s recognize what this is about Jesus.

The closely attentive might notice this Gospel reading came from John, even though this is allegedly the year of Mark. We’ll be hearing lots from John through the rest of Lent and Easter, not getting back to Mark until June, unless we pick up a bit of Mark for Palm Sunday or Easter (when there’s a choice of that or John). I don’t know for sure why the lectionary bigwigs decided to do this, but I’d say it’s partly so we know something more directly that this is about Jesus.

This story is in all four Gospels. They could’ve picked Mark’s version of the cleansing of the temple, but they didn’t.

The other Gospels have this story at the end, during Holy Week, really as probably the deciding factor of why the authorities wanted to kill Jesus: he was too disruptive, too provocative. John has it earlier, right near the start, so it has a different flavor or maybe reasoning.

Clearly we’re always interpreting, always trying to understand. If you’re sorting through why I’d ride my bike in the winter, for example, you might think it’s about climate change and not using fossil fuels. You might imagine I like the exercise and the fresh air. You might say I like adventure, or perhaps term that as saying I’m crazy. It could go on.

Forget my biking, though. It’s bigger for church. This project has been defined for 1000 years as “faith seeking understanding.”* I believe the biggest question for us as Christians is “Why

did Jesus die?” But we could ask Why questions with everything, including Why cleanse the temple?

For trying to interpret what Jesus was doing in this, sometimes it gets tied to a saying from the prophets, about a den of robbers, that the thieving aristocracy was abusing the holy place as a hideout. Sometimes it’s thought Jesus was trying to be bold and provoke a response and start a revolution. Sometimes we might say it’s because he was angry, that even Jesus got upset.

One interpretation I believe we should set aside is that Jesus was against spending money in there. That can get twisted nowadays so that our Confirmation students shouldn’t sell crafts at church as fundraisers for a community organization. I hope we can be fairly certain that’s not what Jesus is against. Drew Hart’s new book has this line: “Do not miss it: the problem wasn’t merely that there was buying and selling in God’s house.”**

Still, another aspect of interpretation is that Jesus was protesting injustice, that he didn’t like that those moneychangers were taking advantage of the poor, that the religious system had gotten commodified, that selling doves and sheep was extortion from people without enough to spend.

Now, if I tried to say that you had to give 10% of your income in order to participate in this congregation, that might match such a notion. (Let me say as a sidenote that I believe tithing is good and well worthwhile, for you and for our work together, and I’d encourage it. But not demand it!)

In Jesus’ time, though, it wasn’t so clearly that the expense was obstructing people’s spiritual practice; rather, buying animals was *how* they practiced their religion. So rather than offerings you don’t want to offer here at church, a closer parallel might be if we took an axe to the grand piano and had a book-burning of hymnals, poured out the communion wine and threw the bread out for the birds.

Well, that’s normal time. Now, maybe it would require shutting down YouTube or hacking away

* Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109): “*fides quaerens intellectum*”

** *Who Will Be a Witness: Igniting Activism for God’s Justice, Love, and Deliverance*, p65

Ethernet cables to dismantle you from these ways you are trying to connect to God.

But that all leads to another point: why would Jesus disrupt the temple, where people were trying to connect to God? The Gospel of John's interpretation of why Jesus is cleansing the temple is because God isn't found in that building, but in Jesus. This is about Jesus! Jesus shuts down the religion of the temple not because it was so rotten and unjust, but because it's point was moot. The building wasn't where to look for God; you find God in Jesus, particularly in the destruction of his body and as he was raised on the third day.

A couple more thoughts about that. First, this is not about what Jesus *does*, but about God in Jesus. It's not trying to tell you to do what Jesus *does*, to find your own versions of where to cause a ruckus and throw people out. There may be occasions for that, just as there are economic injustices and thieving hierarchies we should stand against. But that's not what this story is for. This story is for connecting you to God.

Second, then: about that old building. As we're making distinctions, I strongly say this isn't anti-Jewish. Jesus wasn't against Jewish practice. By the time John was interpreting it, the temple had already been gone for a quarter century. Which is like asking if you cheer for the 1995 Atlanta Braves and if you like Hootie and the Blowfish concerts and would never miss an episode of ER. Such interpretation is anachronistic, doesn't fit.

Another version: the story isn't itself anti-temple, but politics of today that would reconstruct a temple in Jerusalem (and inevitably tear down the Dome of the Rock) I think is a bad idea. But not because of what Jesus did in the story.

And, again: in the Holy Land, there are constant references to "this is the holiest location for Jews; this is the third holiest site for Muslims." For Christians, this reading alters that understanding. It's not places that are holy; it's a person, a body. It's God incarnate in Jesus. And then maybe extrapolated to the presence of Christ in each other, or in the vulnerable, or with creation.

For this abnormal time, maybe there's some good news that it's not about a building, since you

are not only not in Jerusalem, but can't even be here on the west side of Madison. I suppose it raises questions of why we invest in and work hard to renovate this building, if that's not particularly where or how you're connected to God.

Maybe we'd say it happens more personally, like in a sermon to connect you to God, proclaiming God revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection—the foolishness of our preaching, as Paul called it.

But I hesitate on that, too. I'm not the embodied presence; I'm recorded and far away. I'm not "live" (an interesting word with "living"), so there's extra disconnect. Even you aren't live with each other.

I guess to connect with God, you somehow still need Jesus himself.

I don't know. We'll keep working on the interpretation, faith seeking understanding. And when our wise discerning is thwarted, maybe when we again encounter the crucified Christ, we'll remember after his resurrection and believe about him.

For now, the peace of Christ be with you.