

“The Temple”

Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Jesus was enraged. Our mental gears grind as we try to envision the picture of an enraged Jesus. Jesus is, as we will soon sing in our Communion liturgy, *“the lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.”* Three of the four Gospels tell us he was, in his final hours, “silent before his accusers.” He beckons, as we heard in today’s words of pardon, to *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28) He is the one who invites us to his table with the sacrifice of his own body and blood, and his words to his disciples throughout the ages echo in our souls *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* (John 15:13)

Yet there he is in today’s Gospel, driving the animals out of the temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers, charging the pigeon-keepers to leave. All four Gospels report this incident. As the disciples looked on, horrified, they remembered Psalm 69:9: *“Zeal for your house will consume me.”* What is going on here?

First, we need to understand the holiness of the temple. It was “other.” This is hard for us to understand who treat the sanctuary like our living rooms, who drink our coffee in the sanctuary as if it were the café, and who dress better for the world on Saturday night than we do for the Creator of the Universe on Sunday morning. But for the devout Jew of the first century, the temple was “other,” “holy,” and pilgrims from around the world would travel there to honor God.

To reinforce the “otherness” of temple worship, many rules had developed. Offerings of sacrificial animals could only be made with animals deemed “pure” by temple authorities. A

rural farmer bringing his cow from Galilee might have to exchange it – and pay for the privilege – for a sacrificial cow (yes, that’s where the expression comes from) certified worthy by temple authorities. Gifts of money could only be made in temple coinage. Not only were Roman coins used to pay the hated Roman taxes; not only did Roman coins have the likeness of Caesar on them in violation of the Second Commandment; but Roman belief in emperor worship made the use of such coins in the temple a sacrilege. In and of themselves these things were not necessarily “bad,” and the writer of this week’s Upper Room Disciplines pointed out that the merchants provided a needed service for religious pilgrims.

The problem with this system was that it invited corruption. Too often ordinary animals were found to have a blemish and the faithful had to buy one which did not. The exchange of Roman coin for temple coin meant a “cut” for the dealer. And there was a temple tax for all these transactions. The Bible scholar William Barclay points out this meant the equivalent of millions of dollars in the temple treasury at the time of its destruction in AD 70. The very rules that were designed to purify God’s house were being used to corrupt it and inflict injustice on the powerless. When Jesus says, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”, the word “marketplace” literally means “emporium” or “bazaar.” If you’ve ever experienced a middle-Eastern bazaar, you know that part of the game of trading is to win the barter. We are sensible enough to know that the so-called Yankee Swap we play at the Adult Christmas party belongs in Dodd Hall and not the sanctuary. A house of prayer had become a house of manipulative, self-seeking trade.

This diversion of purpose – from the Temple as a house of prayer and source of faith to the Temple as a business – must also have inspired Jesus’ righteous anger. Let us not be naïve.

Church *is* a business, and those who think otherwise enjoy the luxury of the ostrich. But it is a business as a *means* to an end, and not the end in itself. The “business” of church – providing and heating and maintaining this campus and our parsonage – is to the end of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” It’s one of the reasons we begin and end all our meetings with prayer, and in many meetings light a candle as a reminder of the presence of Christ.

It is for this reason that the lectionary pairs the reading of the Ten Commandments with today’s Gospel. The First Commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” is a reminder that the business of church is to the end of honoring, worshiping and serving Almighty God, Yahweh, the great I Am, above all.

Some Christians dismiss the Ten Commandments as an outdated relic, superseded by the New Testament and Jesus in particular. The Ten Commandments, they feel, are words of judgment from a harsh and unyielding God. Many do not find in them the intended refreshment of the soul that God conveyed on Mount Sinai. We long for some church to declare: “Special this week: observe any 8 of the 10 commandments.” And because we all tend toward rebellion in some form or another, the rebellious child in us seem as rules made to be broken.

But Jesus would likely have heard these words differently. As a devout Jew, he viewed the commandments as life-giving and life-enhancing from the Author of Life. Known in Hebrew as the “Ten Words,” they brought refreshment to the Word made Flesh. Contained within the Torah, the Hebrew Law, the Ten Words were a place to encounter the wholeness of God. The actions of the merchandisers in the temple placed another god before Almighty God, sullyng the Holy Place. So Jesus would not be silent.

In recent years we have seen the moral erosion of the Church's influence, with the violation of the Sixth Commandment seemingly so prevalent in these days of shootings. I thought about the work that I do in pastoral counseling, and it occurred to me that virtually every life difficulty, with the possible exception of catastrophic illness or death, is covered by one of these. I believe it would make a great difference if we took them seriously.

It is certainly true that we are a people of grace. But even our founder, John Wesley, spoke of the "**means** of grace," with the subsets "Works of Piety" and "Works of Mercy." Here, this morning, in this temple, we have a plethora of means of grace. Among the Works of Piety are reading, meditating on and studying the scriptures, including these "Ten Words;" praying; and sharing in the Sacrament. Among the Works of Mercy are giving generously to the needs of others, seeking justice and ending oppression. A quick reading of our program affords many opportunities.

In this worship and in our ministry together, law and grace are parts of a whole experience of salvation. God has given us that gift at the price of the sacrifice of his Son. God asks us to accept that gift by living love and changing our lives to live in God's pattern. Methodists call it "sanctification," conforming our lives closer and closer to that of Jesus.

In the temple of this church; in the temple of our bodies as we ingest these symbols of Christ's love; and in the temple not created of bricks and mortar but of loving and caring relationships; let us, too, have zeal for our Father's house and the ministry of Christ within and outside it. Amen.