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March 4, 2018 – 3rd Sunday in Lent

Text: John 2:13-22

Jesus Clears the Temple Courts

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”^[a]

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

²⁰ They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Footnotes:

a. John 2:17 Psalm 69:9

John’s gospel is the only one that records this scene in Jesus’ ministry. This takes place after Jesus has called his disciples, but before he’s done much else. It is fitting that Jesus begins the real work of his ministry in Jerusalem. Jesus has come to save his people from their sins. That means striking at the very heart of their idolatry, which unfortunately is the very temple of God. The place where grace and salvation should have been foremost on everyone’s minds we instead find a marketplace.

Now the marketplace was something that built up over time. It started out as a plausible idea. People are coming from all over the country, hauling cows, sheep, birds and so forth for their sacrifices. It’s bound to make everything slow and putzy. Not only that, but you have to have top quality animals. No cast offs or left overs will do. That may not be easy for everyone to accomplish.

So the priests and other temple workers get this idea. Why not just have a market here at the temple, where we’ll collect top quality animals and people can just buy them when they get here and offer them right away? No more need to haul them across the country. No more worrying about whether the animal will be good enough to be accepted. We’ll cut out all of the

problems and save people a lot of grief.

While still not a good idea, it's at least one that could be given some consideration. Part of the problem is that sacrifice is supposed to be personal. It's supposed to come from you and it's supposed to be about giving something up. It's supposed to mean something to you. It isn't just an item on your to-do list. It's supposed to be something you want to do.

Jesus starts out his public ministry here in Jerusalem by letting people know they won't be able to continue doing things the same old way. Not only were the old ways wrong to begin with, but Jesus is going to turn everything upside down anyway. But, even if Jesus turns everything upside down, nothing will change for them without faith. Jesus wants to remove this temptation from their lives. It has become like Moses's bronze serpent. It once had a good purpose, but now it has led people astray.

Here, instead of a serpent, the idols are convenience and money, both things we are quite familiar with. While this whole enterprise might have started out with innocent intentions, it had long since been changed into a money-making scheme. If you have to get your animals from the temple, then there are all sorts of ways to pad the price a bit. Quality assurance fees, handling fees, and anything else they could think of. They had a monopoly on sacrificial animals and they were happy to make use of it.

Suddenly, the very system God used to interact with his people and assure them of his grace had been corrupted. This is something Jesus will never stand for. In fact, if Jesus didn't have other things he needed to do, he might have made this a daily occurrence. In any event, he is here now and he going to make his point now. It's bad enough you sully God's house with mundane things, but you're also using those things to make a barrier between God and his people and you're lining your pockets while you do it.

Convenience is also a problem. Worshipping God isn't supposed to be easy. Easy is what everyone else looks for. Easy is avoid what's difficult and looking for what's comfortable and what won't make you work hard. Easy is what we want to do, but not what we need to do. Easy would be not admitting we've done anything wrong, not confessing our sins, not acknowledging we've hurt anyone.

Jesus doesn't want anyone else being a barrier in front of God. God wants to know his people in a personal way. He wants them, with his help, to do the hard work of owning up to their sins so they can be washed away. The hard work is what God himself does and he wants

his people to follow suit. The hard work is how this world gets better, not worse. He wants everything we do for God to be a reflection of what's in our hearts. That's what will set God's people apart from the rest in the eyes of the world.

At least that's the intention. God gives to us freely and we offer back to him a portion of what he has given us. We give him thanks and we praise him for his goodness. We don't give to earn his favor. We give because we are already favored and we trust in him for our continued care, protection, and provision. That's what makes our God different from all of the false gods the world has concocted. We can't earn God's favor, but it is given to us anyway.

It was almost like they had overlooked everything God had done for them. God's house became just business as usual. No grace, no forgiveness, nothing special at all. It's sad to see what they were losing because of how they treated God and his house. It all started to look just like everything else. God was just someone to be appeased by gifts and that's all his house was good for too.

We've taken that problem to heart. This space is holy, it is given to God for his use. Here the worship of God should be the foremost thing on our minds. We're sinners, so it isn't always, but part of why we keep this place set aside for God is because this is also where forgiveness and grace are seen and heard, touched and tasted. Nothing should cloud or confuse God's mercy here. This is where it should be seen most clearly.

We certainly do other things that aren't directly related to the worship of God, but we have places for those things too. The fellowship hall, the Bible study room, the Sunday school rooms, all serve God in their way, but here in the sanctuary it is about God's service to us and our response to him.

That's how we designate the places here and church and how we talk about them, but it all ends up being a bit of wishful thinking, a little sleight of hand to show off how respectful we are of God. The truth is that this sanctuary is our marketplace too, that's how we treat it. We say we're here to worship God but the thoughts we have are more about buying and selling. We're still about commerce here.

We put our money in the offering plate. Sure, we call it a gift, an offering, but at some point the thought occurs to us, "What am I going to get in return?" It's never really given away and forgotten, we want something to come back our direction. God needs to do some kind of personalized something to pay us back for everything we've given him. If it isn't money, it

could be some other donation, food for SON Ministries or clothes and such you've given to Goodwill. All things deserving of recognition from God. So we come here to his house to see what that's going to be. "What is God going to do to pay me back today?"

If it isn't money or clothes, then maybe it's something less tangible. Time. "I helped out with that project. I helped out with Oktoberfest or coffee hour. I helped out with ushering or altar guild. That all took time out of my day I could be doing something else. But no, I gave it to you, God. What are you going to give me in return?" Or it could be your family. You're sitting there with your spouse or your kids, you look at them and think to yourself, "Maybe you brought them into my life, God, but I've taken good care of them. I've raised my kids right and I love my spouse. I've done all of this with what you've given me. Surely that's worth something, right?" It could just as easily be your success at your job or at school. It could be any accomplishment you can list off. "I did this great thing, God, and now I'm here to see what kind of reward or payment you'll give me for doing it. It has to be worth something, something I want and care about." So we're back to buying and selling again, trading favors with God, bartering a little time or money or important thing in our life for some kind of payout, seeing what we can get for it.

The purpose of the Sunday morning worship service hasn't changed all that much since John 2. Jesus is here this morning to clear the temple of idolatry. He's here to cast out everything that might turn our hearts away from the pure and free gift of grace God has given us. Jesus throws out all of moneychanging we might do, wanting something in return for what we're giving to God. Jesus comes to throw out the idolatry we've brought into his house. We come here claiming to worship God but really we're here for ourselves, wanting some kind of payment for all we've done.

Jesus has to throw all of that out, because if he doesn't we are lost. It's true we give something to God, but we aren't the ones who start the process. If we are the ones giving something to God first, then we would be right to expect some kind of payment for what we have done. But no, it all starts with God. God gives life. God gives health and strength. God gives love and care. God gives us everything we have. There is nothing we have that hasn't first been given to us, and so there is nothing we can give back to him that is truly ours to give away. If we forget about that, if we are stuck in the mindset that our things deserve recognition and payment from God, then we will also forget God's grace and forgiveness are also free gifts from him and

we will fall back into the mindset that we must earn them, which we can never do.

Jesus comes here today to clear his temple. To everyone who comes here today thinking to get something from God for what they have given him he says, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

We are here in the middle of Lent because Jesus is nearing the end of his journey. He will soon go to the cross to die for the sins of the world. The greatest need we have is forgiveness for our sins and life beyond death. No work of ours could ever afford them. We cannot buy them or pay for them in any way. So Jesus offers up his own life to give them to us free of charge.

Jesus comes here today to clear his temple and he does so in the flesh. He comes in his body and blood to show you what he has given you, forgiveness and life. Free gifts given to those who cannot pay, given to you. Take comfort in what God has given you, out of love. Do not worry about what you will get for the things you have given God, for you already have everything.