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Rev. Kerry Smith

John 2:13-21 The Temple: Risking Righteous Anger
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 11:15-19 New Revised Standard Version

Then they came to Jerusalem. And Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

This story is called the Cleaning of the Temple. We have this idea that this was a huge disruption with Jesus fuming in anger and we can almost see the gold coins falling down in slow motion. The Temple complex was enormous. It was the size of twelve soccer fields put end to end. If Jesus is turning over a table or two in part of the complex, it's not going to make much of a difference given the size of the place.

Remember the Jerusalem Temple had the Holy of Holies where the high priest entered only on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, to ask for forgiveness for himself and for the people. Outside of that was the Court of the Priests, then the Court of Israel, the Court of the Women, and then the Court of the Gentiles who were welcome to worship in the Temple. That outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, is where the vendors sold their goods. The Temple in Jesus' day was a house of prayer for all nations, it was the site for three pilgrimage festivals, it was a symbol of Jewish tradition sort of like how Americans view the Statue of Liberty. The Temple was also the national bank, and it was the only place in the world where sacrifices could be offered.¹

There needed to be vendors on site because there were pilgrims who wanted to offer doves like Mary and Joseph do in Luke 2:24 after the birth of Jesus. There were pilgrims who wanted to buy a sheep for the Passover meal. Imagine if you are traveling from Egypt or Damascus or Galilee and you don't want to risk the animal becoming injured because then it would be unfit for sacrifice. The animal might fly or wander away, be stolen, or die. It is a long way to travel and people might have gotten hungry on the way and decided that they needed to eat dinner more than they needed to keep an animal to sacrifice in the Temple. When you got to the Temple, you bought your offering from the vendors. The Scripture doesn't say that the vendors were overcharging or exploiting the people. There were so many vendors, people would just go to the cheapest one.

The Temple also wasn't a quiet place where everyone looked nice like you do here today. The Temple was a tourist attraction. It was crowded and noisy, and with it being Passover people were happy because they were celebrating the exodus from Egypt and being saved from slavery. For many people, this was one of the few opportunities to celebrate by eating meat rather than just fish.² This was vacation time! You get to leave home, catch up with friends and relatives, see the big city, and to feel a special connection with your fellow Jews and with God.

Then Jesus comes overturning tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. Jesus sounds so violent. Jesus' actions don't stop all business, but it is symbolic. We might think of his anger as righteous anger or even holy anger. There are times when business as

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. Entering the Passion of Jesus. Kindle page 49.

² Levine, Amy-Jill. Entering the Passion of Jesus. Kindle page 50.

usual is not only inappropriate it is obscene. Something has to be done. It is the way that you feel when you see images of suffering children or when you see preventable tragedies occur. It is that feeling when you feel compelled to act.

Righteous anger, anger holy, is about restitution, not revenge. Righteous anger, holy anger, is about correction, not retribution. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount to not get angry with another person, but he doesn't forbid anger against systemic evils like hypocrisy, exploitation, harassment, molestation, drug pushing, for example.³ Jesus is angry in the Temple, but at what? Why?

Maybe it isn't what the people are doing in the Temple, but the attitude of the people who are coming to the Temple. "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?" Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 56:6-7, "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to the Lord, to love the name of the Lord, and to be the Lord's servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

When Jesus asks "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations,'" the answer is Yes! The Temple already was a house of prayer for all people. The Temple was open to everyone, men, women, slaves, Jews, Gentles, free people, rich people, poor people. The Temple was a house of prayer for everyone, and everyone was supposed to feel welcome. Is this place a house of prayer for all people? Or just for people who look like us, walk like us, and talk like us? How do we make other people feel welcome? Is the first thing that a stranger hears in this place, "You're in my seat?" Dear Lord, I hope not. Church is hard enough without people feeling unwelcome.

I remember when I lived in England I would do an American English vs British English quiz. Words like:

- Band-aid=Plaster
- Cotton Candy=Candy Floss
- Garbage/trash=Rubbish
- French fries=Chips
- Potato chips=Crisps
- Elevator=Lift
- Sidewalk=Pavement
- Pacifier=Dummy
- Restroom/Bathroom=Loo
- Tennis shoes=Trainers
- Tic-Tac-Toe=Noughts and Crosses
- Trunk=Boot
- Hood=Bonnet
- Squash/Zucchini=Courgettes
- Football=Soccer
- Sweater=Jumper
- gas=petrol

³ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Entering the Passion of Jesus*. Kindle page 51.

In a church we use funny words like narthex. It would break my heart to think of someone coming to this place for the first time and no one saying to them, “Hello, are you new? Would you like to sit next to me?” When I was on maternity leave, I was able to visit other churches and I seriously don’t know how people do it. We visited one church and it was fine. In the mail a DVD arrived (remember, this was when my 12 year old was born), and the DVD didn’t work! We were not deterred and we came back the next week and went to Sunday School and church. We had to take our daughter to her class and our son to the nursery, so we got to Sunday School after it had started. No one talked to us. Not one single person.

The next Sunday I went alone to a different church and they said to hold hands during the Lord’s Prayer. There were people sitting on both sides of me. I reached out my hands and neither person held my hand, so I sat there with my hands out stretched. I am sure that you have stories too, and if there are stories of things that happened here, I am sorry and thank you for giving us another try. I remember talking to Karen Stone about the Sunday that she had decided to join the church. This was in 1977. She had been visiting for a while and she decided that this was the Sunday she would join. She brought her husband Steve, and the doors were locked, the lights were off, and no one was here. They had decided to cancel church because of the weather and since Karen was a visitor she was not on the phone tree to be called.

How do we make this church feel like a house of prayer for all nations where everyone is welcome? This place should be where we find community, where we welcome the stranger, and repent of our sins. This should be a place where we promise to live a godly life and then keep our promises. This is a time of the church year when we are introspective, when we don’t do business as usual, but we think about how we can really make others feel welcome. It is a time for us to look at our own lives but also at our church. For us to look at what we have done in the past and see what we will do in the future. Are you feeling called to resurrect the dinner groups? Or a new ministry where we can get to know one another better?

This Lent we are talking about the events that took place during the last week of Jesus life so that we might picture ourselves in the story. So we can reassess our own actions and think about how we can make our own corner of the world a more welcoming place for all people.

Have we forgiven trespasses or resisted temptation? Have we loved our neighbors as ourselves? Have we loved our enemies? Have we shaken the hand of the person we do not like or who does not like us? Have we fully been reconciled not only to God but to one another?⁴ The goal of the Christian life is perfection. John Wesley, the first Methodist guy, understood that as maturity in our faith. So, our homes are to be as holy as our worship as a church on Sunday. We want prayer to be a part of our daily practice, not just a Sunday thing. We want to celebrate God’s gifts morning to night, every single day, not just for one hour on Sunday.

This church isn’t just a building, it is a community who gathers in Jesus’ name, who acts as Jesus taught, and who lives the good news.⁵ May we hear Jesus’ words to us anticipating a time when all peoples, all nations, can worship in peace, and in love. A time when there is no separation between home and house of worship, because the entire land lives in a holy state. It is like the prophet Jeremiah says when there will be a new covenant when we won’t have to say to one another know the Lord because we all will know God (Jeremiah 31:34). If Jesus were to walk through these days, I hope that he would feel as comfortable as any other stranger who walked through our door. May it be so today and all days, Amen.

⁴ Levine, Amy-Jill. Entering the Passion of Jesus. Kindle page 58.

⁵Levine, Amy-Jill. Entering the Passion of Jesus. Kindle page 59.