

1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
3rd Sun. in Lent, March 15, 2009

Turning the Tables

Whenever I picture Jesus Christ, I see a gentle man who travels, heals, teaches, explains, prays, loves, and rarely raises His voice. In our passage today, we see Jesus actually lose His temper, and in public! This seems to make our Lord even more human and like us than ever, since we have been known to do the same at times.

We want to be aware that all four Gospels tell this story. Only John says it takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The others say it takes place shortly before His arrest. The important thing is, it takes place.

Our story takes place in Jerusalem in the outer courts of the Temple. Jesus and His disciples are there to celebrate the Passover. This is not a small, quiet celebration. It is a national gathering of God's people in this sacred city in which the Jews celebrate their rescue from Egypt and their birth as a nation. It is a large, noisy gathering. Yet, at the heart of it is the sacrificing of animals, the spilling of blood, and the offering of life, as God commanded through Moses many years before. Every adult male, 19 years or older, within a 15-mile radius of Jerusalem is required by law to be there. So thousands of people crowd into Jerusalem. I visualize the crowds being similar to the fans crowding the streets of Philadelphia to celebrate the Phillies' winning the World Series, but without the sacrificing of animals.

By custom, the Jews who live far away from Jerusalem will have to buy these “ritually clean” animals for their required sacrifice from vendors at the Temple because it is too difficult to travel with their own sacrificial animals. The travelers have to pay with money which is often considered foreign and different from the coins used in Jerusalem, so there are money-changers in the Temple courtyard as well as animal vendors. I picture the Temple in this scene looking more like a sports arena or a circus than a house of worship. This is what upsets and angers Christ. The vendors and money-changers are only there for the purpose of making a personal living. The vendors are taking this money without sacrificing to God themselves! The travelers pay for the animals to be sacrificed, which are overpriced, along with paying a tax on the money they exchange for proper Jerusalem money. Of course, the Temple treasury is full and overflowing when Jesus arrives.

This loud, noisy, competitive marketing takes place in the outer courtyard of the Temple, which is also where the Gentiles, or non-Jews, worship. It is unthinkable that anyone could worship in such a carnival-like setting. Upon seeing all these things happening, Jesus appears to be disgusted.

Despite all this, the Temple is considered sacred. The Temple houses the Ark of the Covenant containing the tablets with the Law of Moses on them. This is where the Jews believe God lives. It is sacred; but as Jesus accuses, His Father’s house is being made into a marketplace.

Imagine with me, Jesus comes to the Temple with His disciples to celebrate Passover and to enjoy the holiday time and to hopefully relax a little. He finds, instead, money-changers with their tables and various coins set up and

doing business along with all kinds animals, sheep, goats, cows, doves, and pigeons, being sold at the expense of the poor. We can almost sense the shame, anger, and sorrow bubbling up in Christ as He lashes out at the whole mess – the animals, tables, money, and men! Making and using a whip of cords, or rope, He pushes over tables, scatters coins all over the place, releases animals, and chases men out of the courtyard, yelling, “Take these things out of here! Stop making My Father’s House a marketplace” We can feel and imagine the intimate, eternal passion between the Christ the Son and His Father.

Christ knows the entire Temple needs to be cleansed if true worship is to be restored. The words Jesus uses are strong. His actions are also strong. But this cleansing is much more than reforming a system of worship. Jesus is putting a stop to this way of life and thinking. With Jesus, there is no earthly building in which God lives for these people to hold on to. God does not live in a building alone but totally surrounds us, inside and out.

In Jesus’ act of destruction and discussion of rebuilding, we find complicated thoughts. Christ’s death is the one sacrifice which will free us from our sin so that a physical temple will no longer be necessary for offering sacrifices. Christ is the One who opens the way for us to enter the presence of God knowing the constant grace of forgiveness. The Resurrected, glorified Christ becomes the new temple in whom God can dwell among His people. All of life can now become an act of worship, a living sacrifice.

During His ministry, Jesus speaks of His Resurrection many times, both directly and in hidden ways. But His disciples do not understand. Then, when Jesus rises from the dead, they believe both the words of Scripture and the words Jesus speaks which are one and the same. Here is the real authority of Scripture, the Living Christ speaking to us through the words in the Bible.

When we meet and accept our Lord and give ourselves to Him, He opens the wonders of Scripture for us and to us. In this way, our belief and faith are strengthened.

The dramatic cleansing of the Temple is no small matter, nor are the signs which follow as Jesus moves about Jerusalem during the seven feast days after Passover. Here we see the miracle-working Christ who seems to fit the expectations of the people rushing to hear His words and be healed. They are willing, as many are, to put their trust in whatever or whomever will get them what they want. It is only when we accept Jesus on His terms that He will commit Himself to us. He knows, without anyone telling Him, what is in all of us.

Christ does not necessarily ask us to clean out our sanctuary. We have a sexton who does a marvelous job of that already. Jesus asks us to take a close look at our personal temples, ourselves, our bodies, minds, and souls. In Romans 12:1, Paul encourages us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Christ wants us to turn the tables on the things we may think, do, and say needlessly, to chase things out of our lives which prevent us from focusing on God, and to scatter impure and unholy thoughts, words, and

actions from our lives. Christ wants us to focus on Him, to love Him, obey Him, serve Him, and encourage others to come to know Him. He wants us to use Him as our role model, to read more about Him, and to pray to Him. He is willing to give His life for us on the Cross of Calvary. Are we willing to give our lives to Him? Many of us already have. May we each focus on Jesus Christ and consider prayerfully presenting our bodies, ourselves, to Him as a living sacrifice. It is not an easy thing to do, but the reward is a close, loving relationship with God through Jesus Christ and eternal life! Amen.