

## Jesus's Protest

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*John 2:13-21 — The Jewish Passover was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jewish temple leaders then said to him, "What right do you have to do this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The temple leaders then said, "This temple has been under construction for 46 years, and will you finish building it in three days?" But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body.*

Imagine with me that we're attending a big basketball game at a small college. The bleachers are packed. Local TV and radio crews are on site. Several large generators have been brought to the campus for this occasion, and there are long electrical cords running from outside the gym building into the arena. The lights and scoreboard are illuminated, the speakers are booming, and everyone is on their feet for the opening tip. Now, imagine with me that a man with a giant pair of hedge trimmers walks out to the generators and cuts all the electrical cords.

Most Bibles call this morning's passage "the Cleansing of the Temple." But one of my fellow pastors, Rev. Mary Hinkle Shore, observes that, in the situation I just described, we wouldn't say that the man with the hedge trimmers was "cleansing" the gym; no, we'd say that he ruined the game—and we'd want him to get in big trouble for it, just like the temple leaders wanted Jesus to get in big trouble.

To bring this morning's Gospel story even closer to home, imagine with me that we're having our annual Strawberry Festival—just a few months away now. We've set up the tables outside, strung all those pretty lights, got the grill up and running, displayed all the delicious desserts. People are sitting down and milling about, chatting, laughing, having a good ol' fashioned time, when all of a sudden, 21st century Jesus walks onto our church property. He's a Middle Eastern man who is dressed like he makes no money (which he doesn't), and his eyes are bulging with rage. He reaches up and rips down the lights, starts turning over the tables and destroying all of our hard work, then starts shouting things that none of us understand.

"Now, stop right there," some of you are thinking. "Jesus would never do *that*—not at our Strawberry Festival, anyways!" It's hard for any of us, including myself, to imagine why on earth Jesus would get so riled up about our beautiful, joyful, communal event. And yet, the temple leaders in our story couldn't imagine why Jesus got so riled up, either.

And why is Jesus so riled up? Well, it depends on where in the Bible you look. See, in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—often called the Synoptic Gospels—the answer is a bit more straightforward: in those three versions of this story, Jesus says that the money changers are making God’s house “a den of robbers”—a quote from the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, in our first reading. This phrase appears to be a reference to corruption. So, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus gets all riled up because the money changers in the temple are charging more than they should for animals to be sacrificed, making an unfair profit off of poor people who are traveling from far and wide to take part in the temple’s religious activities. If there’s one thing Jesus can’t stand, it’s when vulnerable people get taken advantage of. In the Synoptic Gospels, then, *that’s* why Jesus is riled up.

But here in the Gospel of John, we get a slightly different and more confusing answer: “Take these things out of here!” Jesus shouts, “Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” Not “a den of robbers,” but “a marketplace.” This is confusing because a marketplace is precisely what the temple was—or at least part of what it was. Just like you need generators for the college basketball game, and strawberries for the strawberry festival, you need animals and money changers for the temple. That’s because thousands of people come from all over to Jerusalem to make animal sacrifices as a devotional practice, as a tithe, and they need to be able to buy those animals there at the temple and to exchange their local currencies for the currency used in Jerusalem. “So, sure, it’s a marketplace. We do some business here. What’s wrong with that?”

According to John, Jesus isn’t interested in making minor adjustments within the current order of things; instead, he’s interested in bucking the big system. Jesus isn’t talking about a few bad apples, if you will; he’s talking about the entire tree. Jesus isn’t just rocking the boat; he’s capsizing it and saying, “Let’s build something new.” And what new thing does he want to build? What new system is he advocating for? Where is his disruptive and alarming protest going? We get an answer towards the end of our story. When the temple leaders ask Jesus, “What right do you have to do this?” (an understandable question), Jesus gives them a characteristically weird response: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Now, the temple leaders have no idea what he’s talking about, but John tells us, at the very end of our passage, “Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body.” And *that*, friends, is the key to this story, the key to Jesus’s protest.

What is it that makes a place holy? What makes something sacred? According to Judaism, Christianity, and other religious traditions, a place is holy because the Divine dwells there. Something, or someone, becomes sacred when God is present in that thing or that one. The Christian tradition professes that God was fully and uniquely present in the person of Jesus, and this means that Jesus was God’s truest temple. Moreover, Christians profess that after Jesus’ death and resurrection, he sent his spirit, the Spirit of God, to be present in us, the people of God—which means that we too have become God’s temples. Our bodies are sacred sites, holy spaces, for the Spirit of God dwells within each of us. One reason why Jesus cleansed the temple, then, was because he wanted people to focus less on the *buildings* of the temple and more on the *bodies* that are temples.

So, what does this mean for us today? Hypothetically, if 21st century Jesus *were* to storm our Strawberry Festival, like he stormed the Jewish temple, what prophetic message would he speak to us? I imagine that he'd say, "What is most holy and sacred about our church isn't where we gather, this building, or even what we do, our various activities; what is most holy and sacred about our church is us, is you. I imagine 21st century Jesus reminding us, "Don't love your church's building, your church's programs, or your church's pastoral leadership more than you love the church's people. Don't sin against your kindred in Christ in the name of doing what's best for the church." Because the people in the pews around you, friends, they *are* the church. *You* are the church. And however successful or unsuccessful this church is from a marketplace mentality, we are all a part of God's beloved family, and we are called to love both each other and our vulnerable world.

As we receive the sacrament this morning, let us remember this mission, remember our family, and remember with thanksgiving that the body and blood of Christ, the *life* of Christ, is offered to us as spiritual nourishment for our journey. Amen.