

Thy Will Be Done
Sermons for the Lenten Season

God's Will and Honoring the Temple

Psalm 19; John 2:13-22

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Imagine returning home after a vacation. You've been gone for two full weeks, the longest you've ever been away, and you are glad to be back home—finally! However, as you approach your home, you notice a strange pickup truck parked on your neatly manicured zoysia lawn. Curious, you park in your driveway, and get out of your car. You hear loud music wafting from inside your home, and it's not the kind of music you listen to. Little children whom you do not know are playing ball in your backyard. They've dug up three pieces of your flagstone walkway to serve as first, second, and third base. You're afraid to look at home plate. You open the front door to discover that, while you were away, a family you don't know took up residence in your home. You don't let your dog on the furniture, but right there in front of you is their dog sitting on your couch. You've taught your children to clean up after themselves, but their children have trashed your home. And the father is sitting in your recliner in your den watching your TV and smoking a cigar.

Imagine the shock and anger of discovering strangers in your home, people who don't respect it, people who don't understand who you are or the values of your family. You might become angry enough to run them all out of your home.

Each of the four gospel writers records this story about Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the Temple. But John's account is unique. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this story at the end of Jesus' life. In fact, each of them places it in the last week of his life, what we call Holy Week. Not John. John places this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Scholars believe it is the same event, the cleansing of

the Temple, but John repositions the story to tell us something important about Jesus.

So what is John trying to tell us?

This third Sunday of Lent takes us “up” to Jerusalem. Have you ever noticed in the gospels that you never go “down” to Jerusalem? You never go “over” to Jerusalem. You never even go “to” Jerusalem. You always go “up.” Jerusalem was thought to be the geographical and spiritual center of the Jewish faith. It was the high point because it was home to the Temple, the Holy of Holies, believed to be the abode of God. So if you wanted to be *with God*, you went up to Jerusalem to the Temple. Everybody knew that. If you wanted to *experience God*, you had to go to the Temple. So regardless of which direction you came from, you always traveled up to Jerusalem.

It was Passover, John notes, one of the most sacred travel festivals in Jewish life. It is called a travel festival because the faithful had to travel up to Jerusalem to participate. You couldn’t observe Passover at home, so thousands upon thousands of the faithful made the pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. People came from all across the Roman Empire, some sailing into the port Jaffa and then traveling by caravan three more days to Jerusalem. The Passover feast commemorated the people of Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt, the most important event in their shared history. It was an eight-day festival, and at a certain point each family presented a burnt offering. According to the book of Leviticus, the offering had to be an ox, a sheep, or a pigeon, depending upon the ability of the family. Since traveling with animals was difficult or impossible, most families purchased the animals for sacrifice once they got to Jerusalem. A cottage industry developed to provide animals for sacrifice. The pilgrims couldn’t use Greek or Roman money because it had the image of the emperor on it. They had to exchange their money for the accepted currency of Jerusalem. Another cottage industry developed. Over time both of these industries became necessary for the Passover festival to take place.

We have an idiom in English to describe the situation that had developed at the Temple up in Jerusalem. We would say, “The tail was wagging the dog.” It refers to a situation where something that is small

or insignificant grows in significance until it takes over. If unruly students overwhelm an inexperienced teacher and take over a classroom, we would say, “The tail is wagging the dog.”

The selling of the animals and the exchanging of the money were originally small and insignificant, simply a convenience for the pilgrims. They existed only to serve Passover. The pilgrimage was about Passover, the commemoration of God’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt. But when Jesus got up to Jerusalem he discovered that the tail was wagging the dog. The selling of the sacrificial animals had eclipsed Passover. The exchanging of the money—for a price, of course—had had pushed aside the message of God’s deliverance from Egypt.

When Jesus got to Jerusalem, he noticed a strange pick up truck parked on the Temple lawn. A strange family had taken up residence in his home. People who didn’t respect it. People who didn’t understand the values of the family. So John says that Jesus made a whip of cords and drove them all—the moneychangers, the oxen, the sheep, all of them—out of the Temple. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and scattered their money. He told those who were selling the pigeons to get out. “Stop making my father’s house a marketplace!” he demanded.

Let me ask you a question. Was Jesus angry? John never uses that word. He uses the word “zeal.” Some people get upset by the thought that Jesus may have gotten angry. Did he really take up a whip to drive out the animals and people? What about Jesus meek and mild? Everything in this story suggests that Jesus was angry—and angry for the right reason. Anger is not bad or wrong. Anger is simply an emotion, like joy or excitement. Anger can become bad or wrong when misused. Jesus was angry here and channeled his anger in a constructive manner.

The temple authorities stepped in, of course, and you need to hear what Jesus told them. This is very important to John’s use of this story. “Destroy this temple,” Jesus told them, “and in three days I will raise it up.”

The authorities were incredulous, of course. It had taken 46 years to build that temple. Jesus couldn't rebuild it in three days. But notice he didn't say, "rebuild." He said, "raise it up."

This happens often in John. Words sometimes have double meanings. The word "night" may mean nighttime or spiritual darkness. Bread may mean food for the body or nourishment for the soul. Here the Temple wasn't brick and mortar that took 46 years to build. The Temple was Jesus' body, Jesus himself. "Destroy this temple," Jesus told them, "and in three days I will raise it up."

If John repositioned this event to tell us something important about Jesus, what was it? Why did he move this story to the beginning of Jesus' ministry? Here's why. He was putting the religious authorities on notice that Jesus posed a threat to the existing order, that family that had taken up residence in his home and failed to honor the Temple. The religious authorities, those who were invested in the status quo, where the tail wagged the dog, were put on notice early in John. The family is coming home! The family is home, and your little cottage industries are about to collapse. Their Temple, made of brick and mortar, was no longer the geographical and spiritual center of the faith. "I am the New Temple," Jesus was saying. "Destroy me, and in three day I will raise it up."

Forget about Jesus getting angry. That's not the scandal here. The real scandal is what Jesus claimed for himself. "I am the Temple," he said. "I am the Holy of Holies, the abode of God. If you want to be *with God*, come to me. If you want to *experience God*, come to the New Temple." That's scandalous.

Those are the values that define our family today. That's central for us, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. We celebrate the scandal that Jesus himself became the Holy of Holies and extended the love and grace of God to all. When we celebrate that scandal, we honor the Temple. And when we pray from the depths of our being, "Thy will be done," we honor the Temple.

Closing Prayer

Walk with us, Lord, as we make this journey to your cross. Help us to honor you. Amen.