

“The Temple Cleansing” – John 2:13-22 – March 7, 2021

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Today’s gospel story is one that is found in all four gospels, and while John places it toward the beginning of his gospel for reasons of Jesus’ identity, we know it is one of the events that occurred in the last week of his life, right after he entered Jerusalem, and led to his arrest.

It was the time of the Jewish Passover. A feast that celebrated the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Pilgrims from all over the region would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival. Hundreds of thousands of people would make the journey annually, all making their way to the temple. The temple was the focal point of the Jewish religion and of Jewish identity.

Upon arrival, the pilgrims were required to present an unblemished sacrificial offering – cattle, sheep, or doves – and pay the Temple tax. Most folks would purchase the sacrificial animals right there at the temple. Moneychangers were necessary because foreign currency was not acceptable. The sale of animals and the changing of money was a necessary part of the ritual.

When Jesus entered into the temple courts with his disciples, he was confronted with animals for sale and tables set up for the exchange of foreign currency. Suddenly Jesus erupted in anger then fashioned a whip made out of cords, he drove out the cattle and sheep, chastised the men selling the doves, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers.

The chaos attracted much attention and some people, probably the leaders of the temple, confronted Jesus, demanding an explanation for his disruptive actions.

Most likely he was angered by what had become an abusive system – one that profited from those who came for prayer and worship and neglected to care for the poor and marginalized. Not unlike the prophets Jeremiah and Amos, who challenged the flaws of religious institutionalism, Jesus reacted not to the temple itself, but what the temple had come to represent. It was in desperate need of reform because it was oppressing the very people the institution was meant to serve. It lost its focus, took advantage of the faithful, and neglected its purpose. What had originally existed to draw people closer to God and carry out God’s will to care for the marginalized, had drifted far from its purpose. And those caught up in the system could not see its flaws. Or, because they benefited from those flaws, they intentionally chose not to see.

The church is just as susceptible to institutional embeddedness. Take for instance the actions of reformer Martin Luther. Luther was frustrated with the practices and policies of the Catholic Church. It had become stale and oppressive and no longer served the people it was

meant to serve. Luther made a stand against what he saw to be flagrant violations and abuses of power by the Catholic leadership. And out of his public protests, the Protestant Reformation was born.

Our denomination has its roots in the Protestant Reformation and our motto is "Reforming, always being reformed." But unless we really take that motto to heart, and revisit it from time to time, we have the same propensity to become stagnant. Unless we are actually open to the moving of the Holy Spirit, unless we open our hearts and minds and are willing to be reformed, we'll miss the mark as well. By nature human beings dislike change and conflict, even positive conflict. So it is not surprising that many institutions fall into similar traps, spiraling down into ineffectiveness and decline.

This pandemic has forced us into a time of change. A year ago, we had to act quickly to re- envision how we do worship, how we do mission, and how we gather together. During this same time period we have gained more insight into the issues that divide people from one another. We have seen the disparities between groups of people – those who have privilege and those who do not. We have witnessed that minority populations are harder hit by this pandemic due to societal neglect and marginalization. Social justice issues, long covered by ongoing institutional oppression and white-washing, have come to light. We as the church can no longer avoid addressing these justice issues nor pretend that we are not part of the problem.

As we as a congregation move toward our future, we have an opportunity to engage self-examination to see where we fall short of Christ's call to us. What tables might Jesus overturn if he were to come and examine our practices? How have we neglected God's mandate to care for the outcast, show hospitality to the foreigner, be stewards of the earth, lift up the downtrodden, and stand alongside the oppressed? I think if we look carefully we will discover those places where we have allowed complacency, apathy, and avoidance to replace intentional growth forward. Let us look to Christ, allowing his Spirit to guide us to the good work for which we have been called.