

Sermon, St. David's, Lent 3B, 3/2/2024, Exodus 20:1-17 John 2:13-22,

“Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with 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!’”

This isn’t an image of Jesus we get every day, is it? A whip of cords. Pouring out money and overturning tables. Jesus was enraged. Furious. Frightening.

But why? We had a girl scout out in the foyer the past two Sundays selling cookies. Was that making our church a marketplace? Money was definitely exchanging hands. So should we have knocked over the table and poured out the cookies in the name of God?

Of course not! None of us will ever treat a child like that in this church.

But then—what’s going on here? Has Jesus lost his mind? Why is he acting this way? What commandment is being broken that would justify such a response?

As I talked about in the children’s sermon, the first four commandments tell us how to relate to God, and the last six tell us how to treat each other. Jesus tells us in today’s story that he is defending his father’s house, so clearly thinks that the buying and selling going on is cheapening the experience of the holy.

What we do here at St. David’s—that is, gathering together to try to follow Jesus—is more important than the institution itself. But this can be hard to keep straight for many of us, certainly me. I love this place. I worry about our finances. Especially since the pandemic, I worry about whether this place will still exist in fifty years, or if it will become a nightclub or a private home or some kind of institution I can’t imagine. But if I worry more about what will become of St. David’s itself than I do about spreading the good news of God in Jesus Christ, then I fall into idolatry, which breaks a commandment.

I must put God first, the gospel first, not this church. St. David’s is a vehicle, a sacred vessel with which we can worship the Lord. We use this place to follow commandments, to honor the sabbath and keep it holy.

Today’s Gospel makes me uncomfortable. In fact, it’s safe to say that I don’t really like Jesus in this version. He scares me! I prefer the Jesus who hangs out with underdogs, who feeds the five thousand, who draws on the ground when a mob tries to get him to say they should stone a woman caught in adultery, thus calmly saving her life and forcing her accusers to face their own hypocrisy. Jesus chasing sheep and cattle with a whip of cords and knocking things over is not my favorite version. He scares me.

This story of Jesus in the temple shows up in all four gospel accounts, but in John’s Gospel, which we hear today, it shows up at the beginning of his public ministry, whereas in the other

three gospels it takes place toward the end. In John's Gospel, this happens right after the wedding feast at Cana. What a strange placement: right after his first miracle at a joyous ceremony, where his mother basically made him perform his first miracle. After drinking that good wine, Jesus heads to the temple where he becomes enraged and zealous.

Zealous. That's the word his disciples think of: zeal. "Zeal for your house will consume me." This is from Psalm 69, on page 680 of our Book of Common Prayer, where it's translated "Zeal for your house has eaten me up." Psalm 69 describes a psalmist who is suffering: the first lines of the psalm are "Save me, o God, for the waters have risen up to my neck."

I think I am uncomfortable with and scared of Jesus in this story because I don't feel eaten up with righteous zeal in the same way. I worry that makes me lukewarm. What about you? Are you zealous?

I can't say that I don't *feel* zealous. I certainly have strong opinions and my Christianity is of utmost importance to me, but like many of you, like many Episcopalians, I've been trained to be polite. It's pretty clear in today's story, however, that Jesus was not overly concerned about manners. Jesus was passionate about the house of God, and how some people were in God's house for reasons other than glorifying God.

Why are you here this morning? In Lent, starting with Ash Wednesday when we get ashes smudged on our foreheads, in Lent we are encouraged to search our hearts and reflect about why we do what we do, and not only reflect on it, but change direction so that we are on the path that God would have us take.

Do you show up every week out of habit? I'm not going to tell you that there's anything wrong with that. I want you all to show up for any reason. Whatever reason you are here, I am so glad you are here, even if you just want to sell some cookies.

But how can we help one another to become eaten up by zeal for God's house? If we already feel zealous about this particular house of God, how can we show that we love God's message as much as we love this particular church?

The religious authorities in this morning's translation are called simply "The Jews." As I have explained before, the Gospel of John is problematic in our current context when it labels "the Jews" in that way. Jesus and all of his disciples were also Jews. The Gospel of John was written during a time of conflict, and the way the word Jewish has been used has been interpreted as pejorative, which is massively problematic. Jesus was Jewish. Never, ever forget that. He was a faithful Jew all of his life. If we denigrate Judaism, we denigrate Jesus. Do not do that, ever.

That said, the religious authorities, who like many religious authorities, including me, sometimes get too invested in the *institution* over the *message*. So after watching Jesus knock things over and chase animals with whips, the religious authorities demanded a sign from Jesus to explain why he was disrupting the orderly business of the temple with his disorderly behavior. He

suggested that they destroy the temple so that he could rebuild it in three days. They scoffed at him, but his disciples remembered his words after the resurrection.

What I take away from that exchange is how important we as a church are: we the people, not St. David's as a building. I love this building. Many of the most beautiful moments of my life have taken place in these prayer-soaked walls. I love our stained-glass window and our labyrinth that I watched being built. I love the hangings and vestments that Vee sewed. I love everything about this place. I love the way we honor children and the way that laity don't let the clergy get too full of ourselves. Myself.

Because I love this place so deeply, I have to remind myself that the *message* is more important than the place.

That does not mean that our building is unimportant, but as we continue to struggle with attendance and finances, as we continue to honor our call to observe a holy Lent, we are called to remember that the message of God is the most important thing. Honoring God above all else. We are called to be zealous proponents of that message of love.