

<Read text: John 2:13-22>.

Maybe it's just me, but accounts like this are the reason I have sort a bitter taste in my mouth when it comes to the temple in Jerusalem. I mean, it's not like this is an isolated incident. Think for yourself over all the Bible stories you've read that had the temple in them. How many were positive? How many were negative? It just seems to me at least that the temple is the sight of a lot of bad examples and abuses in the history of God's people.

But, you know, that wasn't what it was supposed to be. The temple was the house of God! It was to be a shining beacon of hope and joy to those who trusted in God, it was to be the center of their lives that centered around God! It was the place where you could come when you were in trouble and have a priest offer your prayer to God. It was the place where you could come when you were overcome by guilt and you could make a sacrifice and receive forgiveness. It was the place where you could express your joy and thanksgiving at what God had done for you by giving some of his blessings back to him in gratitude.

The soul that was devoted to the true God had a heart full of love for the Lord, and the temple was the key place where that heart full of love could pour itself out in actions. Actions that were stipulated by the law, yes, but they were actions that happened not because they were demanded but happened because the heart full of love for God could do nothing else.

This was the purpose for which God established the temple. This was the system he tried to create with it. However, that is not how we typically read that it is used. In our account today, it was just about time for the Passover. As many made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the temple would be busier than ever with those who had their annual chance to offer their sacrifices to God. What should have been a reverent display was not. Each household should have approached with what they had chosen to give God because they recognized that God was more important to them than whatever they were asked to give up.

But over time, that gave way to a system of convenience. After all, it was too much trouble to lead a cow or sheep all the way from home. Better to just buy one when you got there and offer that. It was still the same sacrifice. And to make it easier for those people, we could just sell those right here in the temple. And the temple had a specific coin you had to use, had to be the Jewish coin, so if you came from further out in the empire, you're going to have to change that money. Might as well set that up right here too.

As so you see what should have been a reverent and dignified act of love and devotion to the Lord turned into a clamoring marketplace full of noises and shouts and smells all full of people just trying to pay what they had to pay to get God off their backs for another year. And it should go without saying that those offering these services of "convenience" were hardly being above-board with their prices and exchanges. Greed on the one hand and laziness on the other dominated. And when God himself saw this with human eyes, he was enraged. His love for what God had tried to do for these people, in the face of what it was being used for...there were hardly words.

Brothers and sisters, how is the courtyard of your temple? Jesus here calls his body a temple of God. And Paul tells us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Is your heart clear of distractions so that the only thought as you approach God is your love for him, your devotion to him? Or is your heart clogged with the vendors and merchants, trying to turn something beautiful into a cheap commodity? Ask yourself, perhaps, why you are here this morning. Did you come to sit at the feet of a God who loves you, to learn from him and in response show him exactly how much he means to you, no matter what the cost to yourself? Or did you come because this week it was convenient and now that you've paid your temple tax, God should be happy with you for another week, or month, or whatever amount of time you have decided that should buy you? Now that you've been here you can get back to your life and set God aside until the next time your conscience is poked.

That is just one example of how we try to "buy off" God in our lives. Every time we think that we can bargain with God to appease him, we're no better than the marketplace of merchants filling the temple. Every time we think that we have to "pay" him a certain amount of good to make him happy with us so we can do what we want, we have abused his intentions. God does not need your offerings and sacrifices. By themselves they mean nothing to him. What God wants is a broken and contrite heart. A clean heart that loves him above everything. Whatever we give him that doesn't come from this kind of heart only enrages him further just like Jesus did when he saw the abuses in the temple.

And when he saw that, Jesus acted. In an uncharacteristic display, and yet entirely appropriate, Jesus cleansed the temple and rebuked those abusing it. That guy with the normally calm demeanor was filled with fury at what was being done in his Father's house. Such was his love for his Father and his outrage at what was happening that he could do

nothing else. And now, the religious leaders come forward to question Jesus. They don't outright say he's wrong. They were probably aware of the abuses as well and didn't particularly care for some of them, but it's also telling that to this point they had done nothing about them. These leaders, these men, they were the ones who should have done this already, this was their calling, their appointment. But they had allowed the abuses to continue.

And so instead of telling Jesus he did something wrong, they ask him to confirm his authority with them. What gave him the right to act? In the past, God confirmed his messengers with miraculous signs and so they asked for the same here. They shouldn't have had to. What Jesus did was simply right whether it came from a divine order given directly or simply out of a love for God's law. Jesus will not indulge them, and instead speaks to them in a way that they will not understand, but that one day the disciples will understand.

"Destroy this temple," he says, "and in three days I will raise it up again." He knew they wouldn't understand. He knew their hearts were hard. Such is the wisdom of God that it is foolishness to those who are dying because they do not have the light to see by. The disciples later understood. We, from their perspective understand. And that understanding unlocks the truth of what Jesus was saying for us and the application for us in clearing the temple.

As John himself tells us here, the temple Jesus was speaking of was his body. And we know what happened there. The Jewish leaders would destroy that temple. Some out of jealousy, some from political motivation, some for fear of their positions of power, the leaders who were meant to guide the people in God's ways, those leaders would convince the people to put God to death. They called for his blood to be on them. They destroyed the temple of Jesus' body.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that this was indeed God. Jesus is God made man, made like us in every way and yet completely divine and full of all the attributes that entails. Nothing happens without his allowing. Nothing can be done to him that he could not stop if he chose. And so what these men did to him, Jesus chose to happen. The outside observer would ask incredulously, "Why should God, who lacks nothing, who needs nothing to be complete, allow himself to be beaten and tortured by men who hate him? What could he possibly gain by doing so?" That is, in a way, the wrong question. Because it's true, God himself gains nothing. He didn't do it for himself. But the natural mind of man that can only think of itself by default, that natural mind just can't comprehend this.

You and I know the truth. Jesus let the temple of his body be destroyed for you. Like the love for his Father compelled him to clear the temple courts, his love for you compelled him to carry his cross. To sit still as they nailed him to it. To remain hung in the air as the breath slowly left him. To sit there and suffer as God abandoned him to the torment of hell for your crimes. He thought of you as he did it. And not in some general sense as he labored through this. Not in the way our limited brains would process this, going along thinking, "this will take care of everyone." No, Jesus literally had you in mind as he went. And he knew that unless he continued down this path, you would have to suffer instead of him. Naturally, you are the one who deserves it. You earned that fate. But God chose to go in your place instead.

And he died. And on the third day he carried out his promise. The temple was raised again. In the empty tomb a host of promises were confirmed to us. The tomb proves that Jesus was who he said he was. The tomb proves that God the Father accepted Jesus' sacrifice for you. The tomb proves that for everything, for every offense, you are forgiven. And the empty tomb of Jesus is a promise to you, that your own grave will empty as God calls you out of it on the last day. What you need, God has done and gives to you freely. You have eternal life now and none of the trivia of the rest of your earthly life will change that, none of that trivia is more important than that new life in God. You will live because God loves you.

Let that love of God fill up your heart. Let it twist up a whip of cords and drive the abuses out of your inner temple. Let it drive out everything that gives you an excuse for a half-hearted devotion to God. We may look at our past and look at our words and actions with disgust. We may think to ourselves, "I must do better." But better doesn't come from deciding to just act better. It comes when the courtyard is clear and our heart worships God in honest devotion as he intended.

The rest will come naturally. The giving of ourselves, the doing for God and others, the love of God's word, they will happen as they naturally pour out of a heart filled with the love of God. Let the love of Jesus clear out the temple court of your heart, let the love God has for you fill you up with love for him and the rest will follow. Like Jesus who could not do less than act here, our own love for God will fill us up until we can only act for him. Whatever we have to give up of ourselves, whatever time we must sacrifice or inconvenience we must bear in order to listen to him or be near him, we will do it because in love can't do anything else.

Fill your hearts with nothing but the love God has for you, and you will know the true zeal for the Lord. Amen.