

For 7 March 2021, 3rd Sunday in Lent

Exodus 20:1-17; I Corinthians 1:18-31; John 2:13-22

When Jesus entered the temple, the first sound that he heard were the merchants selling their wares. It wasn't just any old thing that they sold. What they were selling was important for temple worship.

Sheep, oxen and doves were required for sacrifices. And exchanging foreign currency in order to pay the temple tax was also necessary. It wasn't what they were selling that was offensive to Jesus, but how they were selling the items used for worship.

The first offense of the merchants was that they overcharged for their wares. By overcharging each merchant could make a huge profit and live the rich life. People couldn't refuse to buy from them, because they were the only ones that sold what was needed for worship.

So, being a sellers market, they would charge five or six times the price that an ox or a sheep was really worth.

And the moneychangers would charge much more for a coin than they would pay in return for it.

So people would argue and haggle and protest and bargain, all at the tops of their voices. Can you imagine the noise and upset going on? All this through the time of worship.

People haggling over the price of an ox – while not 100 yards away people praying. This was their second offense. They kept the people from praying in peace.

The closest thing I can think of to what the merchants did is, if some Sunday morning you came to church to find no bulletins, and in the back of the church starting at 7:00 and 10:00 someone yelling out “bulletins for sale, only \$100”.

This wouldn't be quite as bad as what the merchants did, because we can worship without bulletins, and the Jews couldn't worship without sacrifices.

I'm sure that some would want to have bulletins, and would try to get it for a fair price. Think of the noise that would make all morning.

As this would offend us, so it offended many people in the Jerusalem temple. In fact, it turned worship of God into an experience one would not look forward to.

Jesus found the practice of these merchants a sin. It was a sin against God, because they made prayer times a vulgar thing. It was a sin against God's people, because they would make worship unpleasant, and an expensive rip-off.

Jesus could not stand by and just watch these sins continue. He had come into the world in order to take away sin. And here in the sacred area of the temple were people committing grievous sins.

They had to be thrown out. So that is what Jesus did. He threw sin out with a vehemence that few could match.

Like he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus wants to cleanse all temples. One of the temples that he wants to cleanse is you.

You are a temple. Jesus called himself a temple that would be destroyed soon. His body was a sanctuary of God. The Father was in Jesus. The whole of Jesus' being was dedicated to God, as the temple is dedicated to God. It was God's to use for His glorification.

But this is not where it says that you and I are temples. It is Paul who tells us elsewhere in I Corinthians that we are a temple of God. Your body is a holy place in which God resides.

When you were baptized, the Holying Spirit of God began to live in you. So like Jesus, you are a temple. You are God's temple, built to glorify Him.

Through His love you have been set apart, and made holy. Not just your mind and soul, but also your body. Your whole person has become sacred. And you are Jesus' temple, for it is he who made you holy. It is Jesus who is worshiped in that sacred place.

Like the temple that was committed to His Father, the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus wants to make his temple clean also. He wants to cleanse you and make you whole.

What does he see when he roams the corridors of your heart? Smudges and dirt that needs to be thrown out. These things cannot co-exist with Jesus. Cleansed not only from – but cleansed to be!

To cleanse the temple in Jerusalem Jesus threw out the merchants. He forcibly ejected the offensive. Their offenses were twofold: disrupting worship and overcharging people, which is a form of stealing.

Jesus was concerned that there not be stealing in that holy place. It is wrong to steal, and when this is done with the sanction of the church, the offense is worse.

I'm sure that if he saw people breaking other parts of the second half of the law in there in the temple, breaking the laws that start with "honor your father and mother", he would have thrown them out as well.

It is not only thieves that offend God, but also murderers, adulterers, and those who break any of the rest of these commandments.

In Luther's small catechism part of the meaning of what God says of all the commandments is summed up in the words, "God warns that he will punish all who break these commandments. Therefore we are to fear his wrath and not disobey him."

The thieving merchants got a foretaste of God's wrath in the temple that day. They were punished for breaking the second half – what we call the second table – of the law.

Jesus summed up the second table of the law with the words, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Not only does this statement sum up the last seven commandments, but also extends it further.

Jesus extends the law to our petty bickering. He extends the law to anything we do, say, or think that is not a loving act to any other person.

This does not mean that all anger is wrong – it is only wrong if it does not reflect God's anger. It is wrong if it is not consistent with loving our neighbor and helping them to do what is right.

We may be able to remove some of the offense. We may be able to stop bickering with each other, or in our hearts wanting to do someone harm. We may be able to do thin on our own, but I doubt if we can by our own power.

But if we are able to stop on our own offending God in these ways, still our temple is not pleasing to God. Because if we did it on our own, we would not be placing God in the place of honor in our lives.

WE can try on our own to live in ways that exemplify loving others, as we love ourselves. We may be able to cast off all the things that we do to each other that offends God. But this would only be part of the task.

The merchants could have charged a fair price for the sacrificial animals. The money changers could have given rates of exchange that would have been fair. But Jesus still would have thrown them out of the temple.

They still would have made the prayers of God's people vulgar with their haggling in the background. They would not have been honoring God. They would have continued with the haggling and making noise that kept worship from being a God centered activity.

Without the love of God – that is the first three commandments – loving our neighbor is hollow and shallow.

Therefore, we turn to Jesus and ask him to cleanse us. It is important that when sin is cast away that Jesus does it. We turn to Jesus and ask him to come into control of our lives and cleanse us. He will.

If we try to do it on our own, we are left empty. But if Jesus cleanses your life, you are not empty. You are not left without meaning. For then God resides in you – in you who are His temples.

When he does cleanse us, we are left like the scene in the Jerusalem temple. There is new peace in the temple. We see Jesus alone standing there. He is the center of attention.

It is God's temple, with Jesus being the one who our whole being – our body, our mind, and our soul – focus on.

Before you take that step, I would give you a word of warning. When Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem of sin, he overturned tables. He made a whip. He caused a commotion. He didn't come in as a meek and weak man. He came with authority and conviction.

Tables were overturned. Cattle and men ran about. Confusion reigned for a short time. Cherished ideas of how things have always been done were thrown out. This caused quite a stir.

It is no different for us when Jesus cleanses us. We feel an upheaval. I felt that upheaval myself as I read this text.

When I discussed this text with others, I heard Jesus saying to me, "These are the things that you do that keep you from being my temple, cleansed and open for worship. When you do not turn to me for help.... when you do not allow me to cleanse you.... You are closing off communication with me."

Jesus keeps his line open. We are still his temples, but he wishes to throw away our sin, to cast them far away from us, and to unclutter his place of worship.

He wants to upset us, throw away our clutter of false order, so that true order.... GOD'S ORDER.... and God's peace might come to us. It is a high cost to allow this upheaval, but the reward is great.

The reward we seek is the peace of God in our lives, and not the false peace of men.

Open your hearts to allow Jesus to cleanse it. Make this the way that you start every day. If our lives be cleansed by Jesus, if he comes in to cast away all that offends God, we are not left with an empty tomb of a person. Instead we have the lord of life standing in our life.

We then have the author of the whole of the commandments residing in us, and through him we honor God.

We are not left barren, but our hearts are given new life. And in that life we are given the power to honor God, to grow in obedience to the whole law, and live as God's temple. Then we share with him as can only be done in a sacred place.

Amen.