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John 2:13-25
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Jesus Cleans House

So I am sitting at my dining room table and writing today's sermon. It's a gorgeous blue sky day. A breath of fresh air from the typical grey gloomy days we have here in the Pacific Northwest this time of year. But there is something getting in the way of my being able to enjoy the weather.

Our dirty windows.

I hate washing windows especially how the water runs down your arm and onto your clothes as you squeegee off the cleaning solution. So unless I pay someone to do it for me, it's not going to happen. In the meantime, I just ignore the dirt and tolerate it as best I can. The only problem is that unless I do something soon, the dirt is just going to accumulate and make my view even worse.

In our scripture today, Jesus had had enough of the dirty temple practices that were getting the way of people's ability to worship God freely. The temple sacrificial system. If there were ever a time when we see Jesus go psycho about something, this is the moment.

To set the context for this story in John's Gospel, Jesus had just returned from Cana a little north of Nazareth where he did his first miracle at a wedding feast of turning water into wine. Truthfully, Jesus seemed a little put out by the fact that when the wedding party ran out of wine, his mother, Mary, turned to him to do something about it. To fix the problem. Get more wine. Fast!

Jesus relented, turned the water into wine which was the first of many miraculous signs that John records. Then he went to Capernaum with his family and disciples where they stayed for several days. That gets us to our story today. So please join me as we read from John 2:13-25 and we listen for the Word of the Lord.

13 It was almost time for the Jewish Passover Feast. So Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14** In the temple courtyard he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves. Others were sitting at tables exchanging money. **15** So Jesus made a whip out of ropes. He chased all the sheep and cattle from the temple courtyard. He scattered the coins of the people exchanging money. And he turned over their tables. **16** He told those who were selling doves, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" **17** His disciples remembered what had been written. It says, "My great love for your house will destroy me." (Psalm 69:9)

18 Then the Jewish leaders asked him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do this?"

19 Jesus answered them, “When you destroy this temple, I will raise it up again in three days.”

20 They replied, “It has taken 46 years to build this temple. Are you going to raise it up in three days?” **21** But the temple Jesus had spoken about was his body. **22** His disciples later remembered what he had said. That was after he had been raised from the dead. Then they believed the Scripture. They also believed the words that Jesus had spoken.

23 Meanwhile, he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast. Many people saw the signs he was doing. And they believed in his name. **24** But Jesus did not fully trust them. He knew what people are like. **25** He didn’t need anyone to tell him what people are like. He already knew why people do what they do.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are a couple things that captured my attention in our story today that I’d like to share. Why does John place this story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry where as Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it at the very end, just before his arrest and crucifixion? If Jesus had regularly been going up to Jerusalem for the high holidays all his life, then the temple sacrificial system would have been familiar to him. So why is he so up in arms about it now? I’m curious about what was behind the Jews asking for a special sign to verify Jesus’ authority and what sign does he offer? Then we’ll answer what this tell us about Jesus? And finally, we will consider what does this mean for us today?

Each of the four gospels tell this story. So there is great agreement among them that it happened. What they don’t agree on is when it happened in the context of Jesus’ public ministry and what is said in it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it at the end of his three year ministry and right after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday or just a few days way from his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. To the Jewish ruling council, this would have been the culminating event that solidified their decision to get rid of this dissident rabbi once and for all.

But John places it at the front of his gospel and at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Why is that?

One thing we notice throughout John’s gospel is that he is not so concerned chronological accuracy. He specifically arranges stories of Jesus’ life and ministry to drive home theological points. In this case, he set the stage right off the bat for the opposition Jesus received from “the Jews” or the religious ruling council.

Now there is some debate among scholars throughout the ages if maybe John was recounting a separate event from the one taking place in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Origen from the 2nd/3rd century AD and John Chrysostom from the 4th century AD thought that maybe it was. Particularly if we notice the difference in

tone that John recounted of Jesus' response to those who were selling sacrificial animals and changing money in the temple.

John recalled Jesus saying, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

But Matthew, Mark, and Luke each recalled Jesus saying, "It is written, my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers."¹

Origen and John Chrysostom thought that this difference in tone showed a growing disdain that Jesus had for what was taking place. There is a big difference between calling it a "market place" and a "den of robbers."

However, modern scholars tend toward John's story not being a separate event, but rather one and the same. Again, John just placed it in a different location to drive home the theological point of Jesus being The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and not the animals being sold. So I would tend to agree with that.

Now if Jesus had regularly been going to the Jerusalem temple for the Jewish high holidays all his life, then one would think that the temple sacrificial system would have been a familiar scene for him. So why is he so up in arms about it all now?

Let me see if I can begin to answer this by describing the scene in the Jerusalem temple. One commentator wrote, it was "separated into a series of concentric courts, each increasing in holiness as one proceeded closer to the temple proper. The first courtyard, the court of the Gentiles, was open to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. This area contained the merchant and money-changing areas, and here the blind and lame begged and children were present. Only Jewish men and women could enter the court of women, which contained chests for tithes that contributed to temple expenses. Only ritually clean men were permitted to proceed beyond that point to the court of Israel. When Jesus came into the temple and "looked around at everything", he was surveying this area. Only priests could move farther into the temple [from there].

As one can imagine, "by allowing the courts of the Gentiles to become a noisy, smelly marketplace, the Jewish religious leaders were interfering with Jesus' expectation that the temple would be truly a house of prayer for all nations."² One could hardly enter into their time of worship with a posture of prayer with everything that was going on.

Besides, Roman law required Jews to use Roman currency in their everyday lives. So worshippers had to exchange their Roman currency which contained images of Caesar and Roman deities for a temple currency in order to purchase

¹ Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17; Luke 19:45

² *NIV Archeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), Note on "Herod's Temple" on 1648.

animals for their sacrifices. It was a pure chaos. This is why Jesus was so disturbed at what was taking place that day.

He literally upset the apple cart. And his disciples remembered what was said of the coming Messiah, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

Noticing this zeal, the “Jews” demanded “What miraculous sign can you do to prove to us that you have the authority to do what you are doing?”

And he answered, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

The “Jews” thought that he was talking about the Jerusalem Temple but Jesus was using a riddle. He was talking literally about his body being the temple in which God’s Spirit lived.

So they asked Jesus for visual proof that what He said would come true. To them it seemed foolish.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”³

So what then does this tell us about Jesus?

Jesus was clearly passionate about worship and not letting anything get in the way of all people, Jew or Gentile, young or old, slave or free, from worshiping God in spirit and in truth. Upon his death, we even see how the curtain that separated the Holy and the Most Holy places in the temple tore from top to bottom opening access for all.

Jesus also did not like how the religious system had constructed makeshift barriers that restricted people’s to access God. Jesus came so that we could go right before the throne of God ourselves with confidence and grace in order to connect with God. We do not need a mediator other than Jesus himself.

Jesus was not afraid of confronting religious hierarchy with their hypocrisy. The religious leaders would tell people one thing, and yet they would do another. Jesus called them “white washed tombs.”⁴ Clean looking on the outside, but spiritually dead on the inside.

³ 1 Corinthians 1:21-25

⁴ Mathew 23:27

It also shows us how Jesus knows the hearts and minds of all people. John tells us that “He did not need human testimony about humans, for he knew what was in humans.”

And finally, what does this all mean for us today?

Well hold on to your seats.

Because of our Adult Sunday School class on the Book of Revelation, I’ve been reflecting on Jesus’ words to the seven churches in Asia Minor and particularly those to the Church in Ephesus. Jesus said, “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”⁵

My friends, it seems that some in the Church today... and I’m talking about the American Church... have fallen for a breed of Christianity that is not from Jesus at all. I’m talking about American Christian Nationalism. We’ve seen it more and more these days in our country. It’s a belief that sheer military power, strength, and economic dominance can trump everything. We can bully people, manipulate courts with our money, and force nations into our bidding because the United States of America is the best and most powerful country in the world.

Now I am a combat veteran. I am proud to have defended our country against enemies foreign and domestic. But as a follower of Jesus first and foremost, I believe that the notion that America is better than any other nation is simply arrogant and offensive. Yes, we have a great, not perfect, nation. But we aren’t the best. We need to be more careful of the heights we’ve reached, lest God humble us in falling.

If Jesus were to clean house in the Church today from things that were bothering him, I think it would be how we have elevated nationalism over himself. Jesus’ way is not one of dominance, power, and economics. It is one of love, and grace, and mercy. His way is one of releasing control, accepting our weakness for it in our weakness that He is made strong, and sharing what we have with the poor, the migrant, the asylum seeker, and the disenfranchised.

Author Scot McKnight in his book *Revelation for the Rest of Us* rightly asserts the question driving John [the author of Revelation] as he confronted the Roman Empire’s blatant abuses of Christians was, “How does one live in a world that is anti-God, devoted to opulence, consistently opposed to the way of [Jesus] the Lamb, full of itself and intent on being impressive, protected with the might of its militarism, aiming to become the international power, living on the precipice of

⁵ Revelation 2:2-5

constant internal betrayals, driven by economic exploitation of anyone and everyone, structured into a mysterious hierarchical system of power and honor, and driven by arrogant ambition?”⁶

Wow! Doesn't that hit the nail on the head or what?

McKnight's answer is that it is through worship and being constantly reminded of the words of Jesus, who said, “If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life must lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for a person to gain the whole world, and forfeit their soul?”⁷

My friends, we Christians can not afford to forfeit our soul. We need to come back to our first love of Jesus and not let nationalism take over our faith.

I'm not saying we can't be proud to be Americans. WE CAN AND I AM.

Again Scot McKnight says, “One can trust that God empowers government, one can love one's country, one can be patriotic, one can vote and engage in the political process, and one can even serve in office, but that does not mean we bend the knee, casting our crowns before the government and declaring our allegiances. Every government combines Babylon with doing what is right, and it is the dissident [disciple's] responsibility to detect the difference, to speak up and speak out, and embody [Jesus' new] kingdom as it heads for new Jerusalem. Dissident disciples have a healthy dose of discernment and suspicion.”⁸

Folks, we must understand that when when we allow our politics to drive our faith, it can be a dangerous and slippery slope that could lead us to prostitute our beliefs in order to justify our government's actions.

German Christians in World War II showed us that.

I'm sure a few of our feathers have been ruffled this morning. Perhaps in the same way that Jesus did that day in the temple. My aim was not to make everyone mad, but to call out that not everything that masquerades as an angel of light is from God, particularly when it comes to American politics today. There is one Lord and Savior, and He is Jesus Christ! Not Caesar.

So may we take Jesus' word to heart. May we repent of the ways that our politics has polluted our faith. And may we return to our first love of Jesus Christ and follow Him as dissident disciples in America, come what may. Amen.

⁶ Scot McKnight, *Revelation for the Rest of Us, A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus As a Dissident Disciple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 196.

⁷ Matthew 16:24-26

⁸ Scot McKnight, *Revelation for the Rest of Us*, 239.