

### My Father's House

[Gesturing to icon] Is this man angry? It's a little bit hard to tell. As I have said in previous sermons, those eyes "see everything," but that's not necessarily the same thing as being angry.

Was Jesus angry on that infamous day when he cleansed the temple? It could sure seem that way. For the one who had just turned six stone jars of water into wine, in order to extend the gaiety of a wedding party, his actions today seem startlingly different. Is this even the same person?

His disciples were surely shocked, maybe even horrified. To say nothing of the people who were selling and buying animals to be used for sacred sacrifices. As far as they knew, they were doing absolutely nothing wrong. They were worshipping, for goodness sake! Just like we are today.

Let's step back a minute, and see if we can get some perspective by reviewing a few facts. The temple in Jerusalem was for first-century Jews absolutely the most important place in their world. It was, quite simply, God's dwelling place on earth. God's "house." Nothing was more sacred than the temple.

[Show diagram] It was comprised of three main sections or areas. There was the Outer Court or Temple precinct (there are on right), where pilgrims gathered to worship; this area also included the Court of the Gentiles, the only place on the temple complex where Gentiles were allowed. There was the Inner Court (in the middle of the diagram), which included the Court of the Women, the Court of the Israelites (reserved for ritually pure Jewish men), the Court of the Priests, and the area where they would slaughter and sacrifice the animals. Then (on the left) there was the temple building itself, comprised of three distinct chambers, including the so-called "Holy of Holies," where God was believed to dwell (and where only the High Priest could enter, and even then, only on the once-a-year Day of Atonement).

It was in the Outer Court or temple precinct where according to John, Jesus "found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables." I say "according to John," because all four gospels include this story of Jesus "cleansing" the temple. It's just that the four versions differ somewhat in their details, and John especially differs from the three others. I'll come back to this.

Why three kinds of animals? It's quite simple. The larger animals were for the wealthy, and the doves were for the poor. We could appreciate the fact that even poor people were given a way to offer sacrifices. We could also question why there were poor at all. How do you think it would feel to be one of the ones sacrificing a bird, when others—those undoubtedly wearing the most lavish clothing—were sacrificing sheep or even cows. The meat on those cows could feed even the largest family. The meat on a dove would hardly feed anyone.

And why the money changers? This was because the currency that most people carried was the kind used in day-to-day commerce, and engraved on this money were the images of Roman, pagan rulers. However, the temple tax could only be paid with the Jewish coin known as the half-shekel. And so anyone with pagan money (which was virtually everyone) needed to exchange it for these half-shekels. So on one hand, the money changers were there for the convenience of the worshippers. On the other hand, the moneychangers did their exchanging for

a profit. How much of a profit, the gospel writers don't say, and the commentators don't agree. Let's just say that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus confronts them he says "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." Leaving little doubt as to the moneychangers' intention and integrity. Perhaps what those three gospel writers make explicit, John simply assumes.

"My Father's house," Jesus uniquely calls the temple in John. The word "Father" is, in John, Jesus' favorite way of referring to God. It's relational. Intimate. Intended to be comforting. But let's not forget that in our bibles the word "Father" is capitalized. Reminding us that this is not just a relational term; it is also a divine title. Implying that his Father is not to be defiled. And neither is his Father's house.

Do we think of our building here as the dwelling place of God? We have no "Holy of Holies" hidden behind a curtain, restricted to the High Priest. (There is a hidden area back behind our communion table, but it is definitely not restricted. Except for certain boys, that is! I won't name any names. ☺)

What do we call this room [gesture]? The sanctuary. Which in my desktop dictionary is defined as a "consecrated place" that is "the most sacred part of a religious building." Which is not quite the same thing as God's dwelling place. Certainly not literally. But is it still possible to defile this space? I will come back to that.

So, is Jesus angry in this story? None of the four gospel accounts say so explicitly. In John especially, the writer implies that Jesus is more determined and deliberate than angry. After all, the writer says that Jesus "[made] a whip out of cords." Which might have been the rushes used as bedding for the animals, and it would have taken some time and maybe even planning to make. Neither do any of the gospel writers say that Jesus shouted his words in an angry way, using the much tamer verb "he told them."

It is his actions that grab one's attention. One might even be tempted to say "his violent actions." After all, he uses that whip made out of cords or rushes to "drive all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle." Which in the NRSV seem unclear whether that meant just the animals, or the people selling them as well. But other translations of this gospel, and the other gospels, make it clear that John meant "all of them," including the sellers. I don't know about you, but I can hardly imagine Jesus using a whip against other human beings! At least, I don't want to. It was indeed an act of violence. Our Jesus. The Prince of Peace. Whether he actually physically hurt them, which none of the gospel writers specify, is really beside the point. (Judy brought me a whip I could use in this morning's enactment. It was a hard decision, but I decided against using it. ☺)

I'm ready to propose that, yes, Jesus was angry in this morning's story. There is a time to be angry. (We sometimes refer to that as "righteous anger.") Put differently, there is a time to get people's attention; to make a statement. (Did I get yours this morning?)

I've mentioned some of the differences between John's version of the story, and the other three gospels. The most significant difference is that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the cleansing of the temple comes in the last week of Jesus' life, after his so-called "triumphal entry" on what we call Palm Sunday. As if to offer a possible reason why the religious leaders eventually had Jesus arrested and crucified. What he did in the temple that day, in all four gospels, was over-the-top unacceptable to them. But in the Gospel of John, the temple cleansing comes very early in the gospel, as if to alert the reader, from the get-go, that this man [gesture to icon] is not always, if ever, quite what we expect him to be. Or even, quite what we would like him to be.

And so the questions we need to take home with us today are these. Are there activities or practices that need to be driven out of the temple—activities that only glorify ourselves, rather than God? Are there tables that need to be overturned—unjust practices, perhaps, that separate the rich from the poor, the welcomed from the excluded? In what ways has the “pagan world” infiltrated this sacred space? Is the money we bring in here “unclean,” we might ask? In what ways are some of God’s most important commandments being violated?

And then there is this. Only John, who as we have learned loves double-meanings, includes in his story of Jesus cleansing the temple his statement “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” That’s verse 19. And then in verse 21 John clarifies “But he was speaking of the temple of his body.” Christ’s own body, in other words, had replaced the temple as God’s true dwelling place. Leading us to ask, in what ways does our religion—do we—violate the very body of Christ?

Finally, in what ways are we—our bodies, hearts, souls, and minds—a temple, a dwelling place for God, each and every one our Father’s house? I can’t help but believe that what our Father God and our Brother and Lord Jesus Christ most care about is not what goes on here in this place, but what we take with us, and who we take with us, when we leave. I look forward to discussing this with you in the chapel following the service.

Now, does anyone want to help me pick up all these coins? ☺

Amen.

### **Questions for Pondering and Discussion**

What questions or thoughts did this sermon evoke for you?

Was Jesus angry? What do we do with an angry Jesus?

How would you have felt if you were one of the disciples? What would you have done?

What do you think of the disparity between cows, sheep, and doves?

In what ways is our church—or our sanctuary—the dwelling place of God?

What might our “Holy of Holies” be?

Was Jesus violent in this story? What do we do with a violent Jesus?

What or who needs to be driven out of the temple?

What tables need to be overturned?

In what ways does our religion, and do we, violate the body of Christ?

In what ways are we—our bodies, hearts, souls, and minds—a temple or dwelling place of God?