

Third Sunday In Lent

March 7, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: John 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

+++

SERMON

So why did Jesus choose to cleanse the temple? I don't know about you, but in Sunday school I was taught that the reason Jesus cleansed the temple was because of the greed of man. I was taught that Jesus did not think that any human being should be making a profit out of worshipping God. So, for the longest time, Jesus' cleansing of the temple was a reminder that we Christians and the church should not act greedily when it comes to worshipping God.



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

Of course, the history of the western church along with the history of Martin Luther developing his *95 Theses* only grounded that understanding for me during my confirmation instruction. When Luther visited Rome and also when he heard of the selling of indulgences, he came face to face with the greed of the western church in their attempt to make a profit off of worshipping God.

And to this day we also continue to see signs of greed by different churches, trying to make a profit off of worshipping God. Just think about all of those televangelists who ask you to give in order to receive God's favor so that you will be blessed with riches or a cure to your disease. Prosperity gospel is very prevalent in our society today. I was flabbergasted when Pastor Tom mentioned in his sermon a couple of weeks ago about a Christian church offering PlayStation VRs to youth whose families would come to their church and make a substantial offering to the church.

However, when I was reading through different scholarly commentaries on our gospel text for today, all of them agreed that this action of Jesus was in no way linked to the greed of the merchants who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, nor to the greed of money changers. Instead, the reason Jesus cleansed the temple was twofold. Firstly, Jesus saw the merchants as a distraction to those who came to the temple to worship God. Jesus felt that the whole of the temple grounds were to be a sacred place where one could come and worship God. To be bothered by merchants trying to sell you a sacrifice or exchange currency with you for the temple tax would take one's focus off of worshipping God. Just imagine the next time you were to walk into the narthex of HAGL only to be bothered by merchants trying to sell you the bulletin for worship like it was a program you would purchase at a Dodger's or Angel's baseball game. Or, imagine that someone places a TV in your prayer space at home and sets it to turn on and play commercial after commercial when you come to pray to Jesus.

The second reason that Jesus cleanses the temple is revealed when the priestly authorities question Jesus and demand he show them a sign that would justify his actions. Jesus responds to their request with the words "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Now this answer confuses the priestly authorities because they are thinking Jesus is speaking literally about the temple in Jerusalem. However, the gospel writer reveals to us that Jesus was speaking metaphorically about his own body, alluding to his death and resurrection.



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

It is this understanding from the gospel writer that tells us the second reason why Jesus cleanses the temple. Jesus is pointing out that to now worship the Father, one must turn to Jesus, for Jesus and the Father are one. As it is explained later by John, Jesus does nothing without the Father, they together are one. In other words, Jesus is pointing out that the place to worship God is through Jesus, for Jesus is the new temple; the new place of worship.

Sometimes I think we as Christians forget that wherever Jesus is present, there our worship can commence. Sometimes I think we Christians come to rely too much on our church buildings as the only place we can worship Jesus. Of course, over the years we were taught that to go to worship, to go to church was to go to our respective buildings of worship. Over the years the church lost its understanding that Jesus can be worshiped literally anywhere in God's kingdom.

Now this isn't to say that our church buildings have lost their sacredness. Since we can worship Jesus literally anywhere, we certainly can still find Jesus in our houses of worship. However, Jesus, through the cleansing of the temple, is making a statement to us that our worship of God is found by turning to Jesus. Whether we turn to Jesus in our church buildings, in own homes, at a park, in the airport, at a nursing home, at a peaceful protest for justice, while feeding the hungry, and even through a virtual setting like Zoom or Facebook Live, there we are worshipping God, for Jesus is present.

This understanding of worship frees us to find the presence of Jesus outside of our church buildings. It frees us to worship Jesus through loving and serving neighbor, stranger, and even enemy whom we meet off of our church properties. It is a reminder to us that, even though we remain separated by a pandemic, we are still the church, for Jesus is present in our virtual gathering and in each of our homes.

But what is even more exciting about this open understanding of worshipping Jesus is that it frees us to try something new as we move forward into our missional future. I strongly believe that God is using this time of pandemic to reform the church, to broaden its understanding of what it means to worship and serve others beyond our church membership. Many of our churches, including us, have had to adapt by broadcasting our worship services online. While I understand that some people don't like to worship this



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

way, we also cannot deny that we are possibly reaching out to new people who have come face to face with Jesus through our virtual worship. Moving forward, even post pandemic, I believe that many churches will continue with an online presence, in addition to in-person worship, as a way to reach out to others who either don't know God or have turned away from God. It is an exciting future for the church!

Whether it is doing what we can to preserve the sacredness of our various worship spaces, or finding new places to worship Jesus, the key to all of this is to remember that where we find Jesus, there we will find a place to worship. And often, Jesus will show up in unlikely places where we never thought to look, in people we thought unlikely to be someone who would ever want to venture into a church building. Yes, Jesus will show up in many different places and people in our lives.

The season of Lent is a wonderful time to cleanse our own temples of the things that turn us away from Jesus, so that it becomes easier and easier to find Jesus in God's kingdom. After all, this is the season that leads us to the cross, to the very means of our salvation. It is through the promise of Good Friday, Easter, and Ascension that frees us to worship Jesus anywhere in creation. And, through the gift of baptism, which binds us to God as God's beloved, we are freed from that which would turn us away from God. The more we spend time building our relationship with God, the more and more we will see Jesus out in the broken world and the easier it will become to cleanse ourselves from the various distractions that turn our attention away from worshipping Jesus. This will help us to remember that the true place of worship is wherever we find Jesus.

Amen.



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church