

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander
John 2:13-22
“Turning Tables”
3rd Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2015

In our text this morning it is nearing the feast of the Passover. The feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread were an eight-day ceremony commemorating Israel’s liberation from captivity in Egypt. They remembered the first Passover that is described in Exodus 12, when the blood of the sacrificial lamb was smeared on the doorposts of the Israelites homes so that death would pass over them and they would be spared. The lamb was their salvation on that first Passover.

The historian Josephus estimated that by the first century such festival days would draw more than 2 ½ million people to Jerusalem. Pilgrims from all over would congregate in the busy streets of the city. They would make their way to the Temple to offer sacrifice and to worship. Many would purchase animals for the ritual sacrifices because they would not have been able to make a journey and keep their animals clean and healthy. They would change coins in the Temple courts because they were not allowed to use coins with the image of the emperor to pay the Temple Tax. The use of such coins was considered idolatry. They had to use Temple coinage that had no image on it.

The system wasn’t perfect, but it seemed to work well enough. It was functional and seemed necessary to carry out the day to day business of the place. Still - the scene must have been rather chaotic with all the people milling about trying to make their transactions. What must Jesus have thought when he encountered this scene?

The artist El Greco painted this event in the late 1500s. He showed Jesus in the midst of a mass of people, his whip drawn, people cowering in fear. The religious scribes are off to the side whispering to themselves – “Who does this guy think he is?” They obviously don’t get it at all!

Art critics suggest that this is one of the few biblical themes that El Greco could paint that would satisfy both the Protestant and Catholic world at that time since both the reformation and the counter-reformation were interested in the purification of the church.

That purification has been a primary reading of this event. The Cleansing of the Temple. Historically, there has been a focus on Jesus anger over the corruption of the Temple or of the modern church and about a return to purity in worship and conduct. This has moved from the corporate even to the individual. We are often encouraged to ask “what areas of my life are keeping me from a true and pure worship of God?”

I remember a booklet that was very instrumental in my faith journey as a teenager. It is called “My Heart, Christ’s Home” and it is written by Robert Boyd Munger. The booklet focuses on several scripture passages, some of them from John, that emphasize Christ making his home in us. Munger speaks of the individual heart as a home with various rooms. Each room represents an aspect of the human life. As the story unfolds, Christ moves through each room in the house and lovingly offers suggestions as to how that room might be more completely ruled by his love and grace. There is **The Study** where the mind engages the things of the world, and **The Dining Room** where the appetites are served or denied, **The Living Room** where one invested time with others in relationship, and **the Bed Room**, well - you get the picture. Finally, near the end of the story, Jesus comes to **The Hall Closet**. He says, “Something doesn’t smell right in there – do you want to

talk about it?” And slowly, some skeleton in the closet is uncovered and the closet is cleaned out and life goes on its merry way.

Of course, this is oversimplified, but this is basically one reading of this gospel story. Something stinks in the Temple and Jesus wants to get rid of it – for the sake of all God’s people.

But that isn’t all that is going on here.

All four gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – tell the story that has come to be called “The Cleansing of the Temple.” John is the only one who records it at the beginning of Jesus ministry. And he has a theological reason for doing so.

In the second part of the story Jesus was asked to show some sign of what he had done. They were questioning his authority. Who did he think he was disrupting the money changers and the traders and the commerce in the Temple court that supported the worshipping life of God’s people? His response was simple – “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” What in the world are you talking about, Jesus? Well – as John’s readers - we get the clue. John often gives his audience information that the folks in the story aren’t in on. Here, if we read on, we find out that he isn’t talking about the physical temple that Herod the Great started building back in 19 BCE – but rather the temple that is his own body. And the theological point that John wants to make is that this is the new dwelling place of God.

The Temple that had been under construction for 46 years was no longer the primary place where God could be found. God was doing a new thing. God had come to the people in a much more personal way that was not through sacrificial animals and a priest but was through his Son. Already in the first chapter John had called him “the Word of God” – “the Light of all people” – “the only begotten” – “the one who makes God known” – “the Son of God” – “Messiah” – “the one who Moses and the prophets wrote about” – “the King of Israel.”

And John the Gospel writer placed these words in the mouth of John the Baptizer. Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

What authority does Jesus have? He is the new covenant of grace. He is God’s Passover Lamb who gives his life for the sake of the world.

John tells us that the disciples remember these words from Psalm 69 – “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Some suggest that this meant that Jesus passion for the things of God would ultimately consume him in death. The gospel story reminds us again and again that God was making a way for us to come into God’s presence to experience the depth and wonder of God’s love and grace. The Ten Commandments – which were read earlier in our worship – represent the old covenant of the law – which describes God’s intention for us as a holy people set apart for God. But this law cannot save us. God was making a way for that salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of that law. God established a new covenant of grace that was sealed in his blood. But as we know – death does not have the final word! More on that in a few weeks!

The disciples, John tells us, didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about that day either. It wasn’t until after his resurrection – after the temple of his body was raised – that they remembered what he had said and it clicked. “Oh - He was talking about the temple of his body.” So they believed and it changed their lives. And it should change ours too.

But I wonder if we really get it. Do we see what this means or do we get tunnel vision in our individual lives and in our corporate life together. I wonder if we miss this good news because we are so busy with

business as usual. Perhaps we get so caught up in our day to day routines, our committees and our structures, living by our rules and regulations and our polity and our Book of Order that we miss the fresh new wind blowing through this place of worship and opening our eyes anew to the good news of God. “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” has come and everything is different because of him.

One scholar has suggested that “Jesus challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God, a temptation that exists for contemporary Christianity as well as for the Judaism of Jesus’ day....Christian faith communities must be willing to ask where and when the status quo of religious practices and institutions has been absolutized and, therefore, closed to the possibility of reformation, change, and renewal.”¹

Tonight, our congregation is invited to gather to hear the results of our recent listening groups. We have named this process “For Such a Time as This.” It is an invitation for us to listen again to the Spirit of God as we discern our path together as a community of faith. We are invited to look at our community and at the world through the eyes of the Lamb of God - through the lens of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How will this good news for the world shape Davidson College Presbyterian Church in this particular time?

A third way to read this story is through the eyes of the poor and the marginalized. In one modern re-telling of this story that I recently heard, a widow finds herself in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival and recalls seeing the face of Jesus when he went after the traders with his whip of cords. The face she saw was the face of one who was protecting his children from those who would keep them from arriving home safely. In Jesus actions, she saw a passionate love for those who were weak and vulnerable. Jesus was telling them that there was nothing that would keep them from his love. His life would be their way. His sacrifice would pay for them. His death and resurrection would open the door of the temple wide enough for all to come and worship – without money and without price. Her poverty and her position in life would not be a barrier for her to come and worship. All obstacles were being removed.

This way of reading the story invites us to remove any barriers that we have set up that may have kept others from God. Have our words or actions as individuals been a hindrance to others? Have our rules, regulations, and expectations been a stumbling block for others? Have we in any way kept someone from experiencing the love and grace of God by encouraging the idea that they are an outsider and are not welcome. Have we made anyone feel like they don’t belong? Jesus has come so that the barriers might be removed and so that all may come freely to worship the Lord of all creation.

Friends, the gospel of John helps us to see the passion of Jesus for the things of God and for the world that God has made. He has come to reconcile us to God – to remove the barriers of sin, institutional pride, apathy, prejudice, and anything else that keeps people away from the worship of God. Jesus Christ is turning tables in this world and inviting us to see the world and one another as he does.

I close with this poem by Mary Ann Ebert entitled, “Cleansing the Temple.”

Is this the gentle Jesus
Whose healing touch is balm,
Consoler of the broken
And messenger of calm?
Is this the friend of children
At whom the tempests cease –
Are these his hands of blessing,
Is this his voice of peace?

His eye is bright with anger,
His workman's hand strikes clear –
The traders cringe and scatter,
Torn by unholy fear.
The mighty temple totters,
For all its golden wealth:
The Spirit blows a tempest
Of cleansing, of new health.
This is the day he promised
Of good news to the poor –
Cast out the old corruption,
That blocks the temple door!
Throw wide the gate of freedom,
Let all God's children come! –
Through Jesus' broken body
God's people shall come home.ⁱⁱ

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Gail O'Day, The New Interpreter's Bible: Vol. IX. Abingdon Press. 1995. P. 545.

ⁱⁱ Mary Ann Ebert, "Cleansing the Temple"