



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

this way forward

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF JESUS: JESUS – THE TEMPLE OF GOD

John 2:13-22

March 4, 2018

Dr. Thomas E. Evans

As we explore Jesus' character, a seemingly simple item that would be nice to know is the expression he carried on his face. That might tell us volumes but with no photographs, we simply cannot know. The more popular images of Jesus, besides a beard, have a rather peaceful expression with a glow of angelic love surrounding his face.

Obviously, they are not based on the cleaning of the temple! This is the one instance of physical violence from Jesus and it's somewhat hard for us to imagine this event and perhaps even more hard for us to picture his countenance.

But in this year of exploring Jesus' character, it teaches us what truly matters to him. Turning over tables and driving animals with whips clearly demonstrates a deep-felt passion that Jesus has. An emotion, coupled with action, that we find nowhere else in the Gospel and it is all about his Father's house.

Jesus wants nothing to be a distraction from the focus of the Temple for the worship of God. In part, this is why in designing Presbyterian worship spaces, we are to have nothing in it that divides our loyalties or fails to point to God. Worship is about God and not about us – and Jesus is willing to make quite a scene to underscore this fact.

To better understand the nature of his anger, let's remind ourselves of the temple practices surrounding this event.

Pilgrims arriving at the temple needed money for two purposes. First to pay the Temple tax, an entrance fee of sorts, for the maintenance of the temple. Secondly, for purchasing animals such as doves, to sacrifice in order to have their sins forgiven.

The purpose of the money changers has to do with the First Commandment: Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me. The pilgrims carried Roman

currency, which bore the imprint of Caesar and claimed he was God. This was unacceptable for use in the Temple, so they traded the Roman coins for Jewish currency.

Our story takes place when the temple was in its busy season – Passover – and pilgrims were arriving from all around the region.

First, the money changers presence would have been a distraction from turning people's hearts and minds toward God as they arrived for worship. Just imagine coming to First Presbyterian and, before you could enter the Sanctuary, you had to rifle through your purse or wallet, then navigate a gauntlet of tables to exchange currency, while trying to discern which table had the best rate. Clearly a distraction!

When Wendy and I lived in Buffalo we'd often take our visitors to Niagara Falls, one of the most beautiful and powerful parts of God's artistry in the Americas. As millions of gallons of water rush over the rocks, an almost deafening thunderous sound echoes down the canyon carved by the eons. A misty spray rises up from the bottom, coating all things with an effervescent glow that offers cool relief even on the warmest of days.

It may be even more beautiful in the winter. The mist freezes all the trees with ice that shimmers radiantly in the light. A perfect place to bask in the glory, wonder, and power of God's creation.

Perfect, that is, until modern man descended upon it, with fluorescent lights, tacky signs, potholed roads, power lines, and more. For me, the sight is almost completely ruined by the nauseating junk all around.

I imagine this was a key part that prompted Jesus' fury.

Additionally, the system was economically corrupt. Jesus accused these money changers of price gouging, not giving a fair exchange rate in the currency exchange.

This would be a clear violation of the spirit of one of the Ten Commandments, “Do not take the Lord’s name in vain.” Using God’s name for personal gain is at the core of that commandment. This would have infuriated Jesus.

Also, it would have put up barriers for people to worship, especially the poorest of society and they were always at the forefront of Jesus’ heart. Jesus often verbally pummeled anyone who abused the poor and, like the prophets before him, believed God’s wrath and justice would reign upon those abusers.

In part, the Reformation was born from similar abuses. They were horrific and just as flagrant as in Jesus’ day. Pope Leo X doled out bishoprics to relatives and used the Vatican treasury to fund his personal extravagances. But, apparently, even the Vatican had its financial limits, so he began selling the forgiveness of sins.

Called “indulgences”, they could cover future sins or pop a relative out of purgatory (something like a get-out-of-jail-free card).

These indulgences might help fund a special project of the Vatican or help a local Prince, like Albert of Brandenburg, to purchase the archbishopric of Mainz. He could pass the cost off onto his subjects not through taxes or fees, since the people had been bled dry from previous church posts he had purchased, so he turned to the selling of indulgences.

Just as in the time of the temple, the Lord’s name was being used in vain, in this case for the vanity, ego, and power of princes, kings, and popes.

Clearly, Jesus’ fury was justified and the reformation purging just as needed to cleanse the church of the abuses of its time.

Not only does this passage teach us Jesus’ zeal for his Father and his Father’s house, but it discloses a core sense of his own identity.

After the cleansing, the text turns to a surprisingly mild encounter with the locals. Their livelihood was being threatened. One would have thought such actions would have resulted in Jesus being thrown in jail and whipped with the same lash he used in the temple. But, instead, we only have a question, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

Jesus’ response speaks volumes, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” We know that Jesus was referring to his body as the temple, not in the way that you and I might think of our body as God’s temple, but literally.

Remember, that the temple was God’s house. And the center of the temple, The Holy of Holies was the place in which God resided. Not too long after Jesus’ death, the Temple was destroyed by Rome. There is no temple any longer.

Jesus body, his very self, was the place in which God lived. Jesus is the temple of God. And so, defiling the exterior representation of God’s presence on earth, that is Solomon’s temple, for Jesus would have felt like defiling his own body.

Despite the initial mild reaction to his actions, according to Matthew, one week after this event Jesus is dead and, furthermore, it might have been the trigger point for this death.

Although the Bible has only a few sentences about this event, as time passed legends and lore grew, some of which might be traced back to within a few decades of the event itself. These accounts, like the Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea (written sometime after perhaps the 4th century), seem to suggest that Jesus was crucified not so much over some high-minded, theological transgression, but because of money.

It says something sad about our world. Jesus could talk and annoy authorities all he wanted to, and nothing much may ever happened to him. But,

once you start messing with people's livelihoods and power, they order up a crucifixion in double time.

Jesus' actions remind us that our worship must be pure, should never be watered down, and we must wholly turn our hearts and minds to our Lord. The music, prayers, the space, the liturgy all should exalt the glory of God.

This story teaches us about the unswerving courage of Jesus and his passion for worship that is pure.

As his followers, we are called to that same worship: space that draws us to God's majesty and grandeur, music that turns our hearts to the Lord, and sermons, prayers, and liturgies that open us to God's truth, in other words, worship that wholly reflects the glory of God. We need the courage to live out such worship, not worship that is designed to entice the world, but worship that confronts our own limits, so that we might fully know the limitless love and grace of Christ. Amen.