THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“On Having Zeal”* John 2:13-22

An angry Jesus who makes his own weapon to punish people is an unusual Jesus to contemplate. Further: a Jesus who takes his weapon and begins swinging it at people (and animals!), driving them out before him—this is even more unusual to think about.

Is it disturbing? Well, maybe not entirely.

Although the image of Jesus most of us carry in our hearts and minds is that of the gentle, loving shepherd who welcomes little children onto his lap, or carries a lamb in his arms, we are *not* unaccustomed to this particular portrait, too.

Although this is not the image that comes to mind most readily, we do know this story, and I think most of us sympathize with Jesus’ unusual behavior. We understand his feelings. For Jesus, the Temple, this sacred place of worship must have felt like it had been invaded by worldly ways and manners and priorities. The Gospel of John says Jesus had “zeal” for God’s house.

The Temple was supposed to be a place of worship, a house of prayer. This beautiful place, this sacred place, was special and holy by intention and by design. Although Herod had commissioned it and paid for it, it was still a place to which the whole community had given their time and effort to support, too.

It was a place that had been set apart from the rest of the world because it was dedicated to God and God’s glory. As such, it was a place that was supposed to be beyond the commonplace jostle and pull of the accumulation of financial gain and human power.

It was the center of *God’s* power and so all activities, other than worship, were an affront to that purpose, they were distracting, disrespectful, even intolerable, thus, the Jesus of the verses John 2:13-22.

As I said, we sympathize. We, too, would have a similar reaction if we saw people setting up shop in the narthex of our Sanctuary—wouldn’t we?

The thought of unbridled commerce in a sacred place is jarring to most of our sensibilities. However, it is a little different when applied to this story and this scene out of Jesus’ life.

While it is true that the buying and selling within the Temple precincts seems disrespectful to us, it was obviously not as clear-cut to the people of Jesus’ day. For them, the money changers and the animal sellers were performing a helpful service.

The money that was changed was Roman coins. The pilgrims who came to worship and pay their Temple dues could not pay them with Roman coins—which was the coin of the realm—because each coin held a picture of Caesar on it—Caesar who considered himself god-on-earth. The Roman coins were blasphemous and needed to be exchanged in order for the people to worship faithfully.

The animal sellers also provided a needed service. Animals without blemish were another requirement for worship. Many of the worshipers came from far away. Rather than bringing an animal all that way with them, it was much more helpful to be able to purchase an animal right there at the Temple.

Were the money changers and the animal vendors taking unfair advantage of the people who came to them? Were they charging too much? Jesus does not accuse them of that (in this Gospel). Rather, his concern seems to be the disrespectful way they were treating this sacred space.

Most of us understand his feelings. Most of us would be very unhappy if our Sanctuary were disrespected. And most of us would take serious issue if someone were to start buying and selling goods inside our church—but would any of us start driving-off people and animals with a whip?

Well, right now, I can imagine of lot of people thinking to themselves: “I would call the police!” I would, too. Partly because such situations can get out of hand quickly, but also because my own “*zeal*” for our sacred space is tempered by the notion that *I* am *not* Jesus, and therefore not *entitled* to be quite so forceful.

Hmmm. *Really?* Let’s think about that a bit.

Well, ok, I will concede that violence cannot be *my* answer, or yours, to right a wrong that we have experienced. There are laws, there are courts of law, there are law enforcement personnel (that is the police), all these things are in place to take care of such situations.

 *However*, while a *vigilante* response is not open to me in our time and place, neither am I, neither are we—as people of faith—allowed to be any less vigilant about how the ways of the world are accommodated—*especially* which it comes to sacred things and ways—like how we treat each other, how we live our lives together.

What is the greatest commandment of all, Jesus is asked.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment, says Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. And then he added: “*And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Accommodation to culture *does* matter and should be addressed when the ways of the world intrude upon the peace and well-being of God’s beloved people. And we *should* be as determined and forceful about correcting the wrongs we encounter. And our justification, our call to do this and to be focused and determined comes from this story of Jesus in the Temple with a whip.

You see, Jesus was doing more than protecting the *sanctity* of the Temple. He was also redirecting and redefining the Temple and where to look for it, revere it, and protect it from all accommodations that are disrespectful and damaging. That is why he tells those who demand that he justify his actions:

*‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body.* [19-21]

That is: from then on, the center of focus and holiness is Jesus. More than even that, *Jesus* becomes the Temple. In that moment, the body of Christ—his *body*—becomes the center of our love and interest. How we treat his body becomes the utmost and highest concern that we have. The way in which we honor the body of Christ becomes the way in which we live and worship faithfully and well.

In the poor, the hungry, the naked, in the alien, in the exploited, in the unloved—this is the body of Christ. This is the Temple we must cherish. When we love God’s beloved people *that* is when God is glorified. This is the sacred body that must be protected, honored, glorified, loved.

Mother Teresa I think said it best when she said that when she looked into the faces of those to whom she ministered what she saw there—in each face—was the face of Jesus “in the distressing disguise of the poor.”

Friends, what Jesus points to in this story, and in the entirety of his ministry, is the sacredness of his body—that is you and me and all of God’s beloved people—all people. *We* are the body of Christ. *You* who are listening and watching right now, we are all a part of his body. We are all included in his love.

And so, my prayer for you, and for me, and for all is that we will love this body; that we will cherish and protect it; that we will glorify it with endless gestures and effort that lifts up and makes it stronger, that loves this body, always. May this be so. Amen.