

CLEANSING THE TEMPLE OF SACRED COWS
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
March 19, 2006

John 2:13-22

Can it really be that it is Jesus, gentle Jesus, who is causing such a disruption in the temple? Is it the same one who said, “Turn the other cheek” who is now turning over tables? Is it Love-Your-Enemies Jesus, Forgive-Seventy-Times-Seven Jesus, who has a whip in his hand and is driving them out of the place—cows and sheep and pigeons and all those who sold these things on the grounds of the Temple?

Of course, as displays of violence go, Jesus with his whip is pretty mild by the standards of his day, or of ours. Jesus may have fashioned his whip from the long reeds that were used for animals’ bedding.¹ Not exactly as threatening as the whip studded with iron barbs with which he would be lashed at his crucifixion, nor the Tasers and Uzis that are a part of our modern arsenal of weapons. And Jesus who beats the air with his improvised whip is hardly Hulk Hogan. He is, after all, the one who at the end will be unable to carry his cross without assistance.²

Nevertheless, it is pretty obvious here that Jesus is angry, angry enough to cause a display of violence. We know about anger, and mostly we seem to think that anger is a bad thing. Aren’t we told that we’re supposed to cool off, to count to ten, to not fly off the handle? Anger is usually regarded as, well, unseemly, tacky.

There are some times when we feel anger is justified. I may get angry if I feel like my life is threatened, or, even more, if those I love, members of my family, are in danger. But Jesus is angry about none of these. It is not his life that is in danger, nor anyone close to him. Rather, Jesus seems to be mad about something else. He is angry about the way they are using the temple. “You have turned my Father’s house into a house of trade!” The economy of God has been transformed into the economy of the market.

¹ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of John* Volume I (Anchor Bible), p. 115.

² Garret Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 28.

They really didn't mean anything bad by it, these money changers and pigeon sellers there in the temple. In fact, they thought of themselves as providing a service for pilgrims who were coming to Jerusalem for the important time of Passover. Let's say I am a Jew who lives far from my homeland, maybe in Rome. I have saved my drachmas patiently for several years, and finally I've got enough for a big pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I buy me a sheep that I'm going to sacrifice when I get there. I drag this sheep on the boat, clean up after the thing all the way to Palestine, and pull it along the dusty roads to Jerusalem. But when I get there, some temple official checks my sheep over to see if it is in fact unblemished as required for a sacrifice. The official says: "Uh oh, you see this spot under the right foreleg? You can't use this sheep for a sacrifice." How much simpler, when I leave home, to stick some extra money in my pocket, and buy a certified sheep right there on the spot in Jerusalem—guaranteed to be free from spots or blemishes, suitable for sacrifices. That's what the animal sellers did.

The same goes for the money changers. Every coin you've got in your pocket has someone's image on it—Lincoln or Washington or somebody. In the Roman Empire it was no different. Most of the time the coins had a likeness of the emperor on them. But for Jews, there was this prohibition—commandment number two—against graven images, and it was thought that offering money that had the image of the emperor on it would break that commandment. But it so happened that there was one kind of coin, the coins of the city of Tyre just up the Mediterranean coast, that had no images on them—only writing. The Jews had decided that this Tyrric coinage was OK to use for offerings in the Temple. So here comes our poor Jewish pilgrim from Rome, fresh off the boat. Not only does he discover that his sheep is blemished, but when he checks his coin purse, he finds that every coin he possesses has an image of the emperor looking back at him. What's a pilgrim to do? The money changers took care of all that. They would gladly exchange the unacceptable money for coins of Tyre. Probably took Bank of Rome Travelers Checks, too.³

Of course, the money changers and the sheep sellers made a little profit on the deal. How would they stay in business otherwise? And the temple officials made a little, too, in the licensing fees they sold to the merchants. It was a win-win-win arrangement. Temple officials, merchants, pilgrims—it worked for everybody.

³ The foregoing information is from a lecture on the gospel of Mark given some years ago by Paul Achetmeier.

But here comes Jesus, flailing his whip and driving out people and animals alike. It must have been quite a scene. Imagine walking past our sanctuary some warm spring day, and out the front door come flying hymnbooks and candles. Somebody shouts: “There’s a crazy man in there throwing things around.” That’s how they must have regarded Jesus.

Jesus is angry, because the people have lost sight of what the temple is for. It’s not a mall; it’s a Temple. It’s not an emporium; it’s a place of worship. It’s not a house of trade; it’s the house of God.

The people had replaced the worship of God with a concern for their own matters. They had taken that which was majestic, and made it something puny. They didn’t know the famous statement in the Westminster Shorter Catechism—they didn’t know it because it wouldn’t be written for 1600 years. But that statement says that the ultimate purpose of human life—the ultimate purpose—is “to glorify God and to enjoy [God] forever.”⁴ They had taken that ultimate purpose, and had put something inferior in its place.

Author Marva Dawn has a wonderful book about the worship of God. The title of this book on worship is *A Royal Waste of Time*. The point of this title is that the worship of God doesn’t produce any products to sell, it doesn’t make anybody rich, it doesn’t accomplish any measurable benefits that cause the stock market to go up or down. From a worldly standpoint, worship is a waste of time. Worship and praise are ends in themselves. We worship and praise God because that’s what we were created to do.

The danger is when we take our times of worship, or when we consider the mission of the church, and we put it in the service of something else—our agendas, our ambitions, our anxieties. In place of God we set up our own sacred cows and we worship those.

Some years ago I got a call from a business concern that was mounting an advertising campaign. They wanted to show pictures in their ads of various places and activities around town, and wondered if they could take a picture of people coming out of the sanctuary after worship and use it in one of their ads. They’d pay us a fee, they said, to use our church in that way. I referred the request to the Session, and the Session, wisely in my opinion, turned the request down. The mission of the church is not in the service of something else, not to sell products for some company. The church and its mission are totally and completely in the service of God.

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1.

But still we have our ulterior motives for being a part of the church. The politician makes sure that church membership is mentioned among that person's credentials, because that might get a few more votes.

I have a minister friend who told of a young woman who called that church one day wanting to get married there. The minister explained that the church had a policy of only allowing church members to use the church for weddings. So the woman joined the church, and after her wedding was never seen again.

“You have taken the house of God and have turned it into a house for your own purposes,” said Jesus. Jesus is not just objecting to selling stuff in church. Jesus is objecting to any time when we use our faith for some other purpose than for the singular purpose of worshiping and serving God.

There are a lot of distractions that would tempt us in our day. The church is called to resist them all. The church is not in the business of making money, or of entertaining people, or of being a do-good society, or of historical preservation, or being a social club, or a place to improve your health. All of those things may happen, and there's not necessarily anything wrong with any of them. It's just that none of these are the church's mission. The church exists for one reason, and that is to carry forward the mission of Christ in the world—loving others, telling the good news, helping those in need.

Actually, the religious leaders showed remarkable restraint on that day when Jesus came storming into the temple cracking his whip and upending tables. “Do you have some sign to show why you're doing this?” they asked. And Jesus replied, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will build it back.” They didn't understand, of course, that he was talking about the temple of his body, and about his resurrection.

Jesus would destroy all the old temples that we have so carefully constructed, where we hang onto all our old sacred cows. Jesus has something better in mind, not just better, in fact, but perfect. To worship him is true worship indeed. The words of the hymn express it well:

The dearest idol I have known, whate'er that idol be;
Help me to tear it from thy throne, and worship only Thee.⁵✠

⁵ “O for a Closer Walk With God.” *Presbyterian Hymnal* #396.