

March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## John 2:13-22 “My Table or Jesus’ Table?”

The lectionary threw us a curve ball this week. Just when you thought we were going to have a “Gospel of Mark” Lenten season, we turn the page on the calendar and here’s John. So to put it in perspective, we went from the most straight-forward, no-nonsense gospel to the most complex and theologically loaded gospel. John doesn’t even follow the same time-line as the other three. Case in point is the scripture that Mary read. All of the gospels have the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke say it was at the end of Jesus’ ministry during his *final* visit to Jerusalem, but John’s gospel says it was early on in his ministry during his *first* visit to Jerusalem that the other gospels don’t even mention! So there’s a lot to unpack here.

First of all, I want to address how this passage is often misunderstood and misused. Some people, especially those who subscribe to the “Jesus meek and mild” narrative, have a hard time processing it. They find it upsetting that Jesus seems to be starting a one-man riot in the Jerusalem temple. Others, as you can imagine, *love* this passage, because ... well ... Jesus seems to be starting a riot in the temple. If you like starting riots, this may be a great passage of scripture to use as justification for your actions. The “Jesus meek and mild” people might just blow it off as Jesus having a one-time “fit of righteous anger.” But the people who *like* riots say, “Oh no, this was definitely a premeditated act! Why would Jesus take the time to sit down and fashion a whip out of leather straps if he wasn’t planning on using it? So don’t sit there all smug and tell me about the value of ‘peaceful demonstrations’ when Jesus saw something in the temple he didn’t like and decided to do something about it!” See, this is a troublesome passage no matter how you look at it. Jesus chose a high-profile, Jewish festival ... one where he knew there was going to be a lot of activity at the temple, and he made a scene. A big, highly visible scene that was so important to his story that all four gospel writers included it.

Now ... let's talk about what was really happening here. A lot of folks want to say that Jesus was mad at the money changers and the merchants who sold animals for ritual sacrifice. He wasn't. Those folks were just there doing what they always did. Depending on a person's vocational path, not everyone had access to animals to make their ritual sacrifices. The merchants were necessary for people to fulfill their religious duties. Jesus wasn't mad at *them* so much as he was mad at the Romans and the Herodians for building this over-glorified, tourist attraction, shopping mall of a temple in the first place. See, what you've got to remember is that the temple in Jerusalem during Jesus' time was not the original temple that Solomon built back in Israel's heyday. That one was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC when they sacked Jerusalem and exiled the leaders and the educated population 600 miles across the desert to what is now modern day Iraq. When the exiles finally came back to Jerusalem in 537, they started to re-build Solomon's temple on a much smaller scale. That didn't go over so well, so they took a break until 520 BC, then started work on it again when they were under Persian rule. That project was completed around 516 BC, but it never quite held up to that first temple that Solomon built. Then in 20 BC when Rome occupied Jerusalem, the Roman government decided that the only way to keep the Jews from rebelling against the occupation was to overhaul the temple and make it a nicer place to worship. So they gave the project over to Herod the Great, who if you'll remember from last week, was an extremely unpopular client king among the general Jewish population. He claimed he was a Jew, but the Jews saw him as just a puppet of the Roman government. This was a huge and expensive remodeling project. And there were two visions of what purpose this temple served. For the Jews, it was supposed to be a place of worship. For the Romans, it was almost like a tourist attraction ... a gathering place like a civic center or a convention hall. "Come to Jerusalem and see this awesome temple our boy Herod made!" And this was a big issue for the faithful Jews.

So when Jesus came in and made a scene, it was his way of saying, "I don't recognize this over-blown civic center as a place of worship!" As

weird as this sounds, Jesus was desecrating this off-brand temple when he drove out the money changers and turned over their tables. He was saying, “We Jewish folks didn’t even build this thing! Persians built it with our help. Then the Romans turned around and remodeled it! This is supposed to be where God dwells?! Hah! Tear it down for all I care. Tear it down to the ground and I’ll raise it up again in three days.” And then John throws in this little comment: “Jesus was really talking about his body as the temple ... and later when he was raised, his disciples remembered what he said.”

What Jesus was showing the people was that God no longer dwelled in the temple. The temple was just bricks and mortar. God is bigger than any temple. This little phrase, “and later when he was raised, his disciples remembered what he said” is the big kicker. This temple that Herod built was ironically destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans who were trying to punish the Jews for their multiple rebellions. This was devastating to the Jews. Who were the earliest Christians? They were Jews. Think about that for a minute. If all your life, you were taught that God dwelled in the temple, and that the temple was the center of worship and practice for your faith, how would you feel if you got news that the temple had been destroyed? Pretty devastated I imagine. It may have even seemed that the Romans were somehow more powerful than God. That God couldn’t even stop the Romans from tearing down God’s own house. But here’s this important passage ... this passage that found its way into all four gospels. A passage where Jesus basically goes in, shuts the temple down and declares it nothing more than a tourist attraction or a giant shopping mall. That must have been a liberating message for those early Jewish Christians. So what if the Romans take the temple down? They’re the ones who made it into a big mall in the first place! It didn’t mean anything. God is bigger than the temple. God’s dwelling place is the whole earth! And our center of worship is no longer that “fake” temple built with human hands. Our center of worship is Christ. Jesus is where we see God.

Which leads me to a question for you all. We've got a pretty good temple here in this building. Yeah, we have a few plumbing issues, and there are some things that need to be repaired, but honestly, compared to a lot of other Disciples of Christ churches in the region, we've got a nice place. Our Denomination's Board of Church Extension say that there is no other Disciples church that they're aware of in the country that has a cool stain-glass window that rolls up like a garage door to reveal our baptismal! When you ask people in the community about our place of worship, they say, "Oh, that's the church that has the light-up cross you can see at night when you're turn off Memorial onto Oleander!" Or, "I remember going there as a kid for Boy Scouts and the Pinewood Derby!" "That's one of the few churches in town that uses an actual bell instead of just a recording of bells." "That's where Chico Ballet has their annual spaghetti dinner show!" "Oh, this is where the neighborhood holds meetings from time to time when an issue that affects this part of town comes up!" I know, I know, I'm not making a very good argument here after preaching a sermon about the Jerusalem Temple not being much more than a community center. You'll see where I'm going here in a bit. Let's talk about the kind of *ministry* that takes place here.

Back in 2014 we did some research about mainline churches and how they either become a stasis church, a legacy church or a reaching church. Stasis churches and legacy churches basically say, "We're tired, we want to give up, so we're either going to die a slow, painful death just doing what we've always done before, or we're going to keep doing what we've always done and sell it off before we use up all our money." Reaching churches say, "We're going to do what Jesus called us to do and address ministry needs in our community. We're not going to do ministry just to get more people to come to church. If we grow, it will be a byproduct of the reaching ministry that we do. And you know what? Even if we die, we're going to go out with a bang knowing that we did our best to follow Jesus' example!" We recognized that our biggest asset was our building, so we made a goal that every room in this facility would be used for some kind of ministry and that some sort of

ministry would happen here every day of the week. It only took us a little less than a year to reach that goal.

As we have for 65 years, we continue to hold worship services, Bible studies, weddings, funerals, celebrations and fellowship groups here in this building. But now Iglesia de Cristo Agua Viva worships here too. We also have a Syrian Orthodox Church that holds special services and fellowship events here on occasion. Shalom Free Clinic provides care for patients at their mental health clinic. We hold grief support groups here. We are one of five churches in town that participates in the Safe Space Winter Shelter. The Chico Area Interfaith Council uses the building for their annual event. Resilience Resources holds support groups here for Camp Fire victims. We are a Red Cross emergency shelter. Seven days a week there is a recovery group or support group that meets in Room 5. We've got a good temple here. But what if we didn't have this temple anymore? Heaven forbid, what if something happened that made it so we couldn't worship here anymore? Like, let's say hypothetically, a global-scale pandemic that keeps people from gathering in buildings? Would that be the end of our church? Heavens no! Because the church isn't the building, the church is the people. We have church when we have Pentecost in the Park over at Wildwood in May! We have church when we gather to serve breakfast at the Jesus Center or the Torres Shelter. We're having church here right now and there are only 3 people in the building at the moment!

The church is where two or three gather in Christ's name at his table. Not ours, but his. Church is wherever we worship God and break bread together. We don't *need* a temple because we *are* temples. And that's scriptural too, because the Apostle Paul wrote that our bodies are temples for the Holy Spirit! Here's a challenge for you. The next time someone asks you, "where do you go to church," tell them, "well, that all depends on where we are! See, our building is over on South East Washington Avenue, but we *go to church* wherever we gather because we believe First Christian Church is located wherever the people come together in Jesus' name." Including right here, right now.