

Whose Temple Is It Anyway?

John 2.13-22

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It is with some wistfulness and no little fear and trembling that I have come to preach what in all likelihood will be my last sermon in Sweeney Chapel. But let me put your minds to rest: in spite of this suggestive passage from John about Jesus, I am no prophet, and I have not come to clean up the chapel in one final frenzy of house sweeping. I have no whipcords, and whatever moneychangers there might be are well out of sight. They have made and paid their shekels, and have retreated to observe from a distance. The cattle, sheep, and doves—all gathered as fit specimens for purifying sacrificial slaughter—are nowhere to be seen here, though this is not to say that some of us might not yet be sacrificial victims. No, no temple cleaning for me, and besides, there is an ample endowment that will keep this temple spic and span and spare for decades to come. So, my only farewell task is to interpret as faithfully as I can this provocative passage from the second chapter of the gospel according to John.

As we know all too well, around this seminary the Gospel of John is not a welcome witness. Its Christology—some say—is much too high and it has too much negativism about 'the Jews.' It is granted that the later church—when it did come to majority political power misused some of these passages in John in its pursuance of a vindictive and dreadful policy of persecution of Jews. But in the time in which this gospel was written, both the Jews who were followers of Jesus as the Messiah and the Jews who refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah of Israel—both of these sibling Jews—were minority players in the larger socio/political world. The struggle was between Jews as to how to interpret, within Judaism, this Jew named Jesus. The struggle became more intense with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. and the rise of a rabbinic Judaism intending to be Jewish without the temple and its priestly coterie and accompanying practices.

So in the time of the writing of this gospel we have beleaguered Jews of the synagogue battling beleaguered Jews of the messianic Jesus movement. On both sides, harsh things were done and said—siblings can feel rivalry with great intensity, especially when matters of inheritance are at stake. So the theological stakes were high for both communities: is this Jesus the very Word of God, Israel's Messiah, the Savior of the world? Or is this Jesus an arresting Jewish prophetic reformer, dead and buried—perhaps even unjustly dead—but dead nevertheless, and profoundly misunderstood by some of his imaginative followers?

Clearly in John's gospel, this Jewish Jesus is the very Word of God that was with God in the beginning, and is God, and is that power through whom all things were made, and is that Word made flesh who dwelt among us, and is the love of God for the salvation of the world, including Jew and Gentile. John would oppose any attempt to reduce Jesus to being merely an unresurrected prophet or merely the Savior of the Gentiles.

Hence, the struggle with the Jewish leaders is a struggle of dramatic theological proportions, and we must not demean it as nothing more than vindictive meanness on either side. The differences between this emerging rabbinic Judaism and this emerging Christian movement are significant, and honesty today requires us to acknowledge these differences and deal with them without violence and hostility. I do not propose today to deal with those differences in their full ramifications, but I will try to work with this

Johannine passage to see what Christian sense it makes.

All four gospels have accounts of Jesus being involved in a prophetic action in the temple precincts that in all likelihood was regarded by the priestly leadership of the temple as the final provocation that would eventuate in his brutal death. Of course, in distinction from the other gospels, John puts this temple encounter at the beginning of Jesus' prophetic ministry. This too is significant.

But toward whom or what was Jesus' provocative action directed? The sacrificial animals? The moneychangers who were so necessary to the economy of temple sacrifices, especially during Passover? The temple leadership? The complex symbolic role the temple had come to play as a boundary marker in the life of Judaism?

As most of us should know by now, John often sees more in the events of Jesus' life than the ordinary observer. John grapples with the **deep meaning**—or what I sometimes call the **deep grammar of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection**. So on the level of deep meanings, John does not see Jesus' action in the temple as directed toward the animals—he might have at least set a few of the doves free into the sky. What about the moneychangers? Jesus does overturn their tables and pour out their coins on the precinct floor. Jesus says to these merchants of sacrifice: "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace."

So John does not merely report the unfolding of events; he also **thickens** them with remembrances and insights. When Jesus says these words to the moneychangers, John—with authorial prerogative—editorializes that the disciples remembered that it was written in the scriptures: "Zeal for your house will consume me." This was written in Psalm 69, which John assumes we readers will know, or, if we don't, we can look it up. Listen to the pathos of these words from this psalm, which should give insight into the Jewish context of the words of Jesus:

*It is for your sake that I have borne reproach,
that shame has covered my face.
I have become a stranger to my kindred,
an alien to my mother's children.
It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;
the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me?*

This is a remarkable witness, and John expects us to ponder the meanings here with something more than slick and easy maneuvers. It begins to look as though Jesus runs the merchants out of the temple and frees the sacrificial animals because they have made the temple—his Father's house—into a marketplace. And then John reminds us that Jesus' zeal for his Father's house will consume him, and that insults and shame will fall on him as one who has become a stranger to his own kindred.

Are we to understand that Jesus is not really opposed to the role of the temple in contemporary Jewish practices, but merely to the conversion of the temple precincts into a marketplace? Does he regard the temple as his Father's house and worthy of more solemn use as a house of praise and prayer? This would seem to be the line of thought developing before us in the text. But the text moves on. "The Jews," which we can now interpret as the temple authorities, ask him for a sign—in other words, an authenticating marker or criterion—for his bold actions of driving out the merchants and animals.

Jesus answers them: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Now the Jews—along with all the rest of us empirically-minded folk—thought Jesus was talking about this very temple itself. And being gifted with argumentative aptitude, the Jewish authorities reply that this temple has been under construction for forty-six years and it is ridiculous to suppose that Jesus himself could destroy it and raise it up again in three days. And we—being empirically alert—could have added that Jesus could not raise up this temple of stone in another forty-six years!

So the temple leadership asks for a sign of authorization, and Jesus talks foolishly about rebuilding the temple in three days. Some Messiah, this Jesus; he cannot even get his engineering facts straight.

But John, the deep theologian, inserts a disarmingly simple but editorial sentence next: "But he [namely, Jesus] was speaking of the temple of his body." The temple of his body? What sense can we make of this? According to John, the real controversy here is about Jesus being the temple of God. This temple, which Jesus himself is, will be raised up in three days after he has been dismantled and destroyed by the powers of crucifixion.

This sudden reversal of meaning requires us to retrace our steps. We heard in the first chapter of John's gospel that the Word of God—the very reality of the God of Israel—has become Jewish flesh and dwelt among us, which actually means has set up his tent among the Jews or tabernacled with them. And it is about this tabernacling Jesus that John the Baptist in the first chapter says: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Are we to believe that this Jewish Jesus is God among us and with us and for us, and that he is that Lamb whose sacrifice renders all other religious and social sacrifices and scapegoating null and void? Are all these other sacrifices merely vain attempts to control the favor and mercy and love of God, which has now been freely given in Jesus' crucified death and resurrected life?

Let the animals go free! Put away your money tables. God's mercy cannot be negotiated with animal sacrifices in this temple. Dare we think that John is telling us that Jesus' body—his crucified and risen body—is the true temple, the true house of his Father and that Jesus will be consumed by his vocation to be this temple, to be God-with-us in Jewish flesh, to be the self-revealing dwelling place of the God of Israel?

In the Jewish linguistic context of John's time of writing, the Jerusalem temple—which was destroyed in 70 C.E. by the Romans and now lies in a heap of stones and mortar—can no longer be the center of Israel's worship of God. So, with this temple destroyed, the disarming summons to all Jews was: go and find some other way into the holiness of God. Most Jews found that holiness within the boundaries of covenantal Torah and rabbinic midrash. Other Jews found that holiness in the life, death, and resurrection of the Jew named Jesus, also called Word of God, Savior of the world, Israel's Messiah, the ultimate sacrificial Lamb of God, the very temple of the God of Israel.

It is a great sadness of Christian history that some of the younger brothers and sisters—the would-be-followers of Jesus as the Lamb of God—would later make vicious war against their elder brothers and sisters. It was a sibling war that ended up misunderstanding that this Jesus—who is the very enfleshment of the Divine Life—is the ultimate mercy-bearing Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. It is this Lamb and cosmic temple of God who summons his followers to be the supreme lovers and peacemakers of the world.

However profound the differences may be in John and today between Jews and followers of Jesus, is it not **at the heart of Christian belief that the incarnate action by God in Jesus intends the crucifixion of all enmity and violence, of all forms of scapegoating, and the resurrection of everlasting peace?**

All this dear friends—in this last sally forth in worship with you—I have dared to preach in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all. Amen.