

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
March 3, 2024 - Lent III

All-Ages Sermon: Missing the Point

Good morning. It's good to be together on the 3rd Sunday of Lent. Lent is this very important season where we get ready for Good Friday then Easter Sunday. And as we move through Lent we have these special stories about Jesus, some of which are kind of strange. Let's use our imagination to get inside this story from the gospel of John and to think about what it might have been like for Jesus and his disciples.

We can imagine Jesus talking to his disciples and saying, "We're going to Jerusalem, and when we get there I'm going to take you to this very special place called the Temple. You are going to love this place. I have such good memories of going there when I was young. There are some animals in the outer courts, but then you go inside. And there is peace. You can go in and there's people who will teach you about the Bible stories with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and you can talk with them about it. And there are very special places where you can go and pray. And it's very easy to feel like God is close to you. It's God's house. My Father's house. And I always leave refreshed, and more focused on loving God and other people.

So Jesus and his friends get to Jerusalem and they're walking up the steps of the Temple. And they get to the outer courtyard and it is just total chaos. There used to be some animals but the place is just crawling with them. First the smell is overwhelming. Cow poop. Sheep poop. Smells so bad. Little pens of sheep and pens of cows and cages of doves. Baaaaa. Moooooo. All these people selling, competing with one another for best animals, best prices.

And then besides the animals and the animal sellers, there is this other group of people called the money-changers, sitting at tables. Because people would bring in these coins with the Roman Emperor's face on it. And this was bad. The Roman Emperor didn't respect the Temple. In fact the Roman emperor called himself the Son of God, which the Jews thought was terrible. You give us the Roman Emperor coin, and we'll give you the Temple coin. But here's the thing: the money changers were cheating people. They were not being fair. People would give them 3 Emperor coins and instead of getting 3 temple coins, they would get 2. Oh, just be quiet.

And this makes Jesus really mad. You all are missing the whole point. This place is supposed to make you love goodness and truth and mercy and justice MORE. They have made an idol of the Temple: Look how pretty our building is. Look at all the animals for sacrifice. Look at all our fancy priests in their fancy outfits. They have forgotten about what the whole thing is supposed to point to: love of God, love of neighbor.

So Jesus makes a whip to get the animals attention and to herd them out of the Temple. He doesn't whip the animals or the people, but it is startling. And so all the sheep and the cows and the people with cages of doves, all go scurrying out of the Temple. And then he goes over to where the emperor coins and Temple coins are stacked up on the table of the money-changers and he turns over the tables and the coins scatter and roll everywhere. "Whoah, we've never seen Jesus like this before."

And then the leaders of the Temple come over to Jesus and say, who do you think you are? Who gave you permission to drive out all the cows and the sheep? Who gave you permission to do this? What authority do you have? You're just a nobody.

And Jesus says something like this. "As much as I have zeal for this place, as much as I want this to be a place where people can pray to God and learn about God, there is an even more important place to know the Father. And they said, "Where is that?" And Jesus said here. Right here. Jesus says, I'm like a living, breathing, walking, talking, Temple. If you want to encounter God, come and be with me. If you want to experience forgiveness, come and be with me. If you want a sense of God's goodness and mercy and justice, follow me.

And Jesus said, this Temple, me – I am indestructible. This Temple, it's going to come down. One day. And yes, I am going to be killed, but 3 days later I am going to rise, because God's power and God's love is greater than anything in the universe.

So what did we learn? It's good to love the Temple. To have zeal for the Father's House. To love the beauty. To connect to God here. To pray here. To feel safe here. It's good to love the Temple, the building, the organ the stained glass, the handbells, the vestments. But it can all become an idol. We can worship the worship, and we can forget what it is all for.

All of this exists to change us more and more into people who love God and love other people. It's the flesh and blood humans who matter the most. Caring for other people, caring especially for the vulnerable, the downtrodden, those without a voice, this is where we really encounter God.