

Gospel - John 2: 13-22

Lent 3

Sermon 3.7.21

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In today's Gospel the disciples understand that Jesus loves his house with a zealous and all-consuming passion. They remember it was written, **"THE ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME."**

In this way God's love is disruptive to say the least.

Last week Jesus was disrupting his disciple Peter. Christ overthrows his well-meant intention to sideline his journey to the cross. He rebukes Peter and commands him to fall in, get back in line. He says, "Get thee behind me."

Today God has Jesus disrupting tables and expelling all obstacles that can block people's access to genuine worship. It says that He made a whip of cords and *drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.* ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, *"Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"*

They are strong measures taken by someone carried along by intense emotion. Between the lines I get the idea of zealous, jealous love coming through. Behind the presumed anger of Jesus there lay emotions of zeal, love, broken heartedness, and even tenderness.

"The LORD your God is a jealous God."

He loves you so much, he is so passionate for you, that he doesn't want to share you with any other god.

The point of controversy in this passage is that not everyone can afford to get in. To put it simply, people had to pay money in order to gain entry. No money, no access. Therefore Jesus insists, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Let everyone come in!

Christ is also dealing with the way we may often and mistakenly think about worship. The trouble isn't about buying and selling animals or exchanging money. Those things had always happened in the temple. They were facets of temple life that existed to uphold God's law.

The trouble is that they had allowed their experience of the marketplace to shape the way they saw God: if I give God this, then God will give me that.

In the face of trouble, promising to give God some kind of down payment will not make God any more likely to come to your aid. God has already made his home with you in your trouble.

In the face of death, bargaining with God will not attract more favor for you; you already have it. Your death is forever wedded to Christ's death, and your resurrection to his resurrection.

In the face of helplessness, negotiating with God for help is useless; God was your helper long before you even asked.

God's love is not to be bought or sold; only to be given freely and lavishly, especially to those who could never pay if they wanted to. God loves you with an everlasting love in spite of anything you can ever think or say or do. God's love is ever present in its raw, immaculate state. In this sense God's love is ruthless, furious and untamed.

Have you never felt a love of this intensity?

When you were a child I am pretty sure that you had parents or grandparent who would ask, "How much do I love you?" Then they would stretch out their arms as wide as they could and say, "I love you this much!"

And did they not then commit to never let anything get in the way of that love? And did they not back that up with any action they deemed necessary?

I remember as a boy watching in a kind of trance-paralysis my uncle run to snatch up a young nephew from being crushed by a rolling car. My uncle's love risked his own life and did whatever it took.

I think Jesus' zeal in the temple is such a description of love's intensity. By his actions he as much as says, "I will let nothing get between us and overturn every obstacle that even tries. I will do whatever it takes."

Do you remember how to play "Hide and Go Seek"?

A chosen child, called "It," closes their eyes and counts. The rest of the children, the "Not-Its," run and hide. When the one who's "It" reaches a certain number, they announce with a shout, "Ready or not, here I come!" and then run to find the other players.

The game reaches a certain point where some players are just not to be found. So the person cries, "Olly-olly-oxen-free!" and everyone gets to return to home base.

It took me a long time to figure out the meaning of "Olly-olly-oxen-free." It is a corruption of the words, "All the outs come in free." Everyone gets invited back home without being tagged or made to be the next "It."

The game is a sort of allegory.

Christ is "It." He goes about to seek and to save those who are hiding and lost. He will even upset tables and drive out moneychangers in order to find a way to those who are hiding.

Some people get found, and some people stay hiding. As John says, "He came to his own, but they did not receive him" (1:20). But as many as do receive him gain authority as his children to return home by faith without any penalty of being tagged.

Then also, for the last 2000 years and especially in our day there's been a continued a cry of open invitation and welcome. "All the outs, you can now come in free." Jesus opens access for anyone, anywhere, and across all time.

Imagine having to pay money or do anything in order to de-serve enough grace to return to heaven's home. No wonder the access denied by the exchangers made Christ's blood boil. His love to reach all people is not to be contained—hence the whip, the driving out of animals and merchants, the overturning of tables, the big, big mess all over the temple grounds.

God's love can be furious and intolerant and messy.

"I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy," Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:2), and Peter says that God is unwilling for any to perish, but that all should come to eternal life (2 Peter 3:9).

It is the scandal and intolerance of grace. God loves you so much that God won't take your "no" for an answer.

We have the Ten Commandments to guide us and help us keep in line. But they will fail us, or rather we them. We will step out of line. But grace is not to be dissuaded or sidelined, and like Peter we will be called to fall back. "Get behind me," Jesus commanded. "Line up, mister!"

Why? God is unwilling to let us go.

There is a chorus that says that

*God loves people more than anything
God loves people more than anything
More than anything, God wants you to know
He'd rather die than let you go
God loves people more than anything*

Jesus is demanded a sign. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" the authorities ask. He answers his critics by saying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

In other words, the body of Jesus, the true temple, can never be destroyed. It can only be raised again to new life. The same is true of his temple the church. It can never be destroyed. It can only be raised. And the same is true for you who are the temple of his Spirit.

That declaration offers great hope for the church of God, both collectively and individually. If one should try to destroy it—if indeed they do destroy it—then God will nevertheless raise it back to life and do it in short order. All the outs will come in free! It's a promise we can surely carry to the bank.

Several weeks ago I ended my sermon with the words, "Lord Jesus Christ, disturb us now"—an open invitation for God to vanquish within us the things God finds displeasing.

I like the idea of love disrupting things, even destroying things that get in the way of love.

Therefore in our heart of hearts I think we have running a prayer that goes something like this:

"Dear Lord, cast out from me everything that offends. Overturn the tables of malice, selfishness and complacency. Drive out my superficial sacrifices and substitutions. Make me wholly thine. Allow me an entry no matter my state—no matter my wealth or race or gender identity or capability or incapability. Let me come to thee, dear Savior; O please let me come."

God answers us in this visual of today's Gospel. Do you see all the scattered coins and animals and people and upset tables? God is saying, "I will let nothing stand in the way of my access to you—not Covid, not isolation, not restricted gatherings, not loneliness, not weariness, not nothing! (not anything)."

As a result, the body of Christ today, the church, sets out to live in ways that are unfathomable to the modern-day market. United with Christ we are free!

Now centered in our baptismal call in God's liberating love we strive to live out justice and mercy in our communities and in the world.

We spend our communal life on hungry people who will never be able to invite us to their own tables.

We spend it on children who will never contribute to the offering plate.

We spend it on dying people who after receiving our most prized treasures soon pass and are no longer present to enjoy them.

Our life is senseless lived by the rules of the marketplace. But thanks be to God Christ always comes along to overturn it.

Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.