

## Sermon 3-7-21

### John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he 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. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

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30 minutes after noon today the Northwestern Wildcats will host the Nebraska Cornhuskers at Welsh Ryan Arena. Now just imagine what would happen if about noon someone goes and cuts the electric cable that powers the arena. The lights would go out. The scoreboard would go black. The TV cameras wouldn't work. Now we wouldn't say that the person responsible for this was cleansing the basketball program. No, they would be stopping the game.

And just like you need electricity to play and televise a basketball game inside an arena, you need cow, doves, sheep, and moneychangers to run a Jewish temple. By driving out the animals and overturning the money tables Jesus makes it impossible for people to buy animals for the required sacrifices, and impossible for those who have come from all over the Roman Empire to exchange their money to buy the animals and pay their tithes. Jesus is stopping the whole temple enterprise.

John tells us that his disciples summed up his actions by remembering a verse from Psalm 69, zeal for your house will consume me.

Are we ready for this Jesus' to come again with zeal to put a stop the games we play? This is a good text for the Lenten season as we seek to return to the Lord our God. We often refer to this event as the cleansing of the temple. But it's much more than that. It's a whole reordering of the religious enterprise of his day. Jesus brings temple activity to a standstill, and in doing so points us to another holy place altogether. The temple authorities are confused by his actions. They want to know what sign he can show for doing this and Jesus responds, "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up."

Did you catch the shift? In John's gospel the temple is no longer the place where you go for an encounter with the divine. Fast forward to Jesus conversation with the woman at the well in the fourth chapter, when she questions him about where one should worship at Mt. Gerizim as her people do or at the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus answers neither by saying that the day was coming when people will worship the Father in spirit and truth. This is what truly matters, not the place, but the how.

And in the ninth chapter, when the blind man, whom Jesus healed, discovers Jesus full identity he responds by worshipping him. This too connects back to what happened at the temple. When Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," John adds a note of interpretation: He was speaking of the temple of his body. The temple for John isn't a place; it's a person.

What then does it mean for us when we say that the Church is the body of Christ? What does it mean to be the body of Christ when we're forced to gather for worship via Zoom rather than in our church building?

I imagine that many here today yearn for the days when we'll gather once again for Sunday worship in that beautiful sanctuary on Lake Street. But in the meantime, even as we grieve and long for a return what was, this pandemic sojourn has given us the opportunity to ponder the most basic questions about what we're doing and why. Divine encounters aren't restricted to a sacred building on a Sunday morning. They can happen via zoom or whenever and however the body of Christ becomes present in the world, at a warming center for the homeless, in the workplace, at a farmer's market, within a family gathering, or by a phone call between friends.

If we truly are the body of Christ, then Jesus words to the temple authorities also apply to us, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days." Dying and rising is the very pattern of life into which we've been called. This is the Jesus way of life to which we've been baptized into. Our old sinful self and all the games we play to come out on top and save ourselves are nil and void. Game over. We as the body of Christ are filled with new life that helps us to imagine a whole new way of being in a restored and reconciled world. And not only that we get to help bring God's rule for our world into being.

Mark Twain once met a man who was very excited about his upcoming trip to Israel and Egypt. He told Twain the he planned to climb to the top of Mt. Sinai and recite the ten commandments. Twain replied, "Why don't you just stay home and keep them?" That's so much easier said than done. Some people chafe at having a set of rules that they have to follow. I think its better to view the Ten Commandments as a blueprint to follow for living well. When we take these 10 words to heart, they guide us in how to have a right relationship with God and with others. They guide us in our dying and rising. They help us to see where our games are over. They assist us in living out the very way of life that Jesus embodied.

There is a story that I am told has been passed from mouth to ear somewhere along the palmetto dunes of South Carolina, a story passed down from West Africa and across the North Atlantic. Depending upon whom you're talking to, it is a little bit different, depending upon who is telling the tale.

The story takes place on St. Johns Island, just off the coast of South Carolina, as Africans who had been mislabeled slaves are toiling in the hot sun. They are working so very hard to grow and harvest indigo, used to produce a rich blue dye. There is one young woman and beside her is her small boy, maybe six or seven. She's working in the fields and she has such incredible dexterity that she is able to pick indigo with her right hand and caress the forehead of her child with the left. But eventually, exhausted by working so hard in the fields, she falls down from the weight and the pressure of being depleted property.

Her boy attempts to wake her very quickly, knowing that if the slave drivers were to see her down, the punishment would be swift and hard.

He tries to shake his mother, and as he's trying to shake her, an old man comes over to him, an old man that the Africans called Preacher and Prophet, but the slave drivers just called Old Devil. He looks up at the old man and says, "Is it time? Is it time?"

The old man smiles and looks at the boy and says, "Yes!" And he bends down and whispers into the ear of the woman who was now upon the ground and says these words: "Cooleebah! Cooleebah!"

At that moment the woman gets up with such incredible dignity. She stands as a queen and looks down at her son, grasps his hand and begins to look toward heaven. All of a sudden they begin to fly. The slave drivers rush over to this area where she has stopped work and they see this act of human flight and are completely confused. They do not know what to do! And during their confusion, the old man rushes around to all the other Africans and begins to tell them, "Cooleebah! Cooleebah!"

When they hear the word, they all begin to fly. Can you imagine? The oppressed flying? Can you imagine the disempowered flying? Three fifths of a person flying? The diseased flying? The dislocated flying? They are all taking flight! And at that moment the slave drivers grab the old man and say, "Bring them back!"

They beat him, and with blood coming down his cheek, he just smiles at them. They say to him, "Please bring them back!"

And he says, "I can't."

They say, "Why not?"

He said, "Because the word is already in them and since the word is already in them, it cannot be taken from them."

The old man had a word from West Africa, Cooleebah, a word that means God. It had been placed into the heart of these displaced Africans and now they had dignity and they were flying.

We are God's temples now and the word of God within us continually transforms us. God destroy whatever needs to be destroyed within us and raises us up on the third day. With the word of God within us we're ready to fly. We fly from breakdown to break through. We fly from brokenness to wholeness, from sorrow to joy, from despair to hope.

God readies us today to fly forth to let all those still playing their power games know that the game is over. God's reign of justice and love has become our temple. And we know deep in our hearts that this is the only game in town.