

Lent 3, March 3, 2024 First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton

**SCRIPTURE READING** John 2:13-22

*Jesus Cleanses the Temple*

<sup>13</sup>The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' <sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'

<sup>18</sup>The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' <sup>20</sup>The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' <sup>21</sup>But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

<sup>22</sup>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.

**SERMON** "Whose House?"

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Pray with me... Please pray with me... Holy One of many names, may the decisions we make and the words we speak be grounded in your words. May every "house" be a haven of love and joy where our love for one another is a reflection of your love for us. O God of temples and tables turned over, may we be ready for the kind of *turned upside down world* you are seeking to build among us, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

This letter to the editor was in a weekly newspaper in California a few years back:

*Dear Sir,*

*It seems to me that ministers feel that their sermons are very important. They spend a great deal of time preparing them. I've been attending church quite regularly for over 30 years, and I've probably heard 3,000 sermons. To my dismay, I cannot remember a single one. I wonder if the minister's time might be spent more profitably on something else.*

For weeks, there was a flood of responses and then, this letter seemed to end the discussion: *To whom it may concern: I've been married for 30 years. During that time, I've eaten 32,850 meals, mostly my wife's cooking. Suddenly, I have discovered I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet, I have the distinct impression that without them I would have starved to death long ago. The table was turned.*

Perhaps by tomorrow you will not recall the details of my message today, but, it is my hope that you WILL remember being here and will feel renewed and *spiritually "turned."*

All who witnessed the events at the temple that day in Jerusalem most likely *never forgot* what they had witnessed. For those who knew Jesus best, they were seeing a side of Jesus that they had experienced before! If anyone who came between Jesus and the people he loved, He did something about it.

1. He was angry at those who refused to help someone with a shriveled hand. "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). He cured the man.

2. He was angry at his disciples for believing that children were second-class citizens. "Let the children come to Me, and don't ever stand in their way, for this is what the kingdom of God is all about. (**The Voice 10:15**) He blessed them.

We look in on the Passover Festival. People came to Jerusalem from all over the world speaking different languages and carrying foreign monies. Enterprising merchants had set up tables in the Temple to accommodate the travelers who exchanged their monies in order to pay their temple taxes. Others sold animals to be used in ritual sacrifices. Think of it as the "Mile of Music" of the ancient world, where people coming into town from all over...but, without the sacrificial lambs. The Temple was crowded with people that day.

The historian, Josephus, estimates that more than 2.5 million pilgrims came to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Add to those crowds, the thousands of cattle, sheep and doves brought to town for sacrifice, and you have something that begins to look like a religious rodeo.

The temple area covered some 35 acres. It had originally been built by Solomon about 950 years before Jesus was born, but it was burned to the ground by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. The Temple was rebuilt and destroyed more than once. The temple in which Jesus found himself this day was the glorious temple begun by Herod the Great, in 20 B.C. It was completed in 68 A.D., **a short time before its complete destruction** in 70 A.D.

With this long history **of the Temple** in the life of the Hebrew people, we can only imagine how important a shrine this was. Temple building and restoration had been a part of peoples' lives for generations. The temple was the center of their life and helped to define what it meant to be a Jew. It symbolized the God's presence. It was critical to restore it each time the Temple was destroyed.

With this in mind, you can imagine how the word spread through the Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem when this controversial Rabbi came through the crowd, overturned the moneychangers' tables and stampeded the animals, saying: "**Take these things out of here! Stop making my father's house a marketplace!**"

In the **New King James Version** of the Bible, these are the words of Jesus:

*"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"*

Jesus was driving out the old system and was making it clear that he was displeased that people were commercializing their sacrifices and their worship...in the holy temple...his father's house.

"What credentials can you present to justify this?" he was asked. Jesus answered, "Tear down this Temple and in three days I'll put it back together." **That sent the people reeling.** "This temple has been under construction **for 46 years**, and will you raise it up in three days?" Ridiculous!

*We know* he was speaking about himself now and not the building of the temple. John writes in vs.22 "After Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered the words that Jesus had spoken."

Today's story speaks to me in this way:

Jesus is angry. The Jesus *we know*, who is kind and compassionate, speaks of love, cures the sick, forgives the sinner, tells challenging stories, confronts the Pharisees...now, is physically aggressive. He could have been arrested right then and there. The *sickness* of the religious system hit Jesus so hard that he reacted instantaneously. His intent was to bring the divine presence back into his "Father's house."

The temple had become nothing more than a slaughterhouse, a trading-house and a party-house. Jesus had to **clean house** in order to once again make room for prayer and praise.

If Jesus walked through these “open doors” today, here at First Congregational United Church of Christ, what would he drive out? What would he empty out? What would he overturn?

And then, let me ask you...What does Jesus need to "drive out" in our lives? What would Jesus empty out? What would Jesus "overturn"?

We have come into this holy place today as God’s family just as the people gathered for the Passover. Here, we come to this “house” to encounter the living God through our praise, through prayer and meditation, through scripture and message and music. Maybe today Jesus will whisper in our ears, give us a nudge; or his voice will shake our innermost being.

My mentor and friend, Rev. Dale Kuck, once said: *“Some of us find God in almost every place that we find ourselves. Others have not tuned into his presence. Some are very sensitive, some are not. If we are insensitive to the normal things in life, friendship, love, the beauty of a spring day, will we be any more sensitive to the presence of Christ?*

*If any of us are dull about the obvious, how can we be alert to spiritual gifts?”*

I believe that Jesus is turning our attention to getting back to the basics and is **stirring us to be aware** of God’s presence.

God is with us when we step over the threshold of these “open doors,” and God is with us *as we step in or out of any door*. We are standing on holy ground...and some of *our tables* need to be turned. **Never forget this.**

After all, “Whose House” is it? Thank you for this house, God, thank you for this house. Amen.

## **BENEDICTION**

Thank you for being in this house today!

Go now, knowing that God has turned our world upside down and called us to a life of transformation. Now, go forth changed, called anew, and turned towards a God who makes us whole.

This hour of worship has ended. Let our service continue. Amen.