

“Jesus and the Money Changers”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, February 17, 2008

Text: Jeremiah 7:8-15 Matthew 21:10-17 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may receive your truth for us today. Amen.

JESUS ENTERS THE TEMPLE

Speedy Morris was the men’s basketball coach for LaSalle University. He was shaving one morning when his wife told him he was wanted on the phone by *Sports Illustrated*. He became so excited about the prospect of national recognition that he hurried his shave and nicked himself. Not wanting to delay the caller, he ran out of the bathroom, lost his balance and tumbled down the stairs. Limping, with blood and lather on his face, he finally got to the phone. “*Sports Illustrated?*” he panted.

Imagine Morris’ disappointment when the voice on the other end droned, “Yes it is, and for 75 cents an issue you can get a year’s subscription. . . .”

It’s tough to be let down. It is disappointing when you think someone is interested in you, only to find they are interested in your money. When salespeople do it, it’s irritating – but when people of faith do it, it can be devastating.

A sad but true fact of our faith is that religion is used for profit. When that happens, there are two results: people are exploited, and God is infuriated.

In the midst of such misguided activities, the presence of Christ cleanses our lives and our religious practices.

Our gospel lesson begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. People greet him as a king during his triumphal entry. Scholar Joachim Jeremias writes that in the first century the population of Jerusalem was approximately 30,000 people. During Passover, it swelled to over 150,000 people. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, this whole city, full of pilgrims there for the Passover, was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”

Jesus entered the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem was an enormous structure, known throughout the Roman world. Herod the Great had rebuilt it, beginning around 20 B.C. in his most ambitious building project. The Temple contained many precincts, including the Court of the Priests, the Court of the Israelites, the Court of the Women, and the Court of the Gentiles.

The scene of Jesus’ encounter with the Temple officials was the large, expansive Court of the Gentiles, into which anyone might come. It was always crowded and busy. At Passover, with Pilgrims there from all over the world, it was thronged to capacity.

In this Court of the Gentiles, money changers had set up tables. Every Jew had to pay a temple tax of one half-shekel, approximately \$250 today, within a month of Passover. After a certain date, this tax could be paid only in the temple itself. The temple tax had to be paid in temple currency. The money changers would exchange your unsuitable currency for the correct currency to pay the tax. Of course, there would be a charge – in the neighborhood of \$80 – to make the exchange. It was quite a racket. Part of the exchange fee went into the temple treasury, but most of it found its way into the pockets of the money changers.

There were also booths in the Court of the Gentiles for pilgrims to purchase doves. For most visits to the Temple some kind of offering was essential. It was easy to buy animals for sacrifice outside the Temple. Any animal offered in sacrifice had to be without blemish. The Temple had official inspectors of the animals. If you brought an animal from outside the Temple to offer as a sacrifice, it was almost certain to be rejected. The inspectors would direct you to the Temple booths to purchase an animal for

an acceptable sacrifice. A pair of doves could cost as little as \$150 outside the Temple. At the Temple booths you might have to pay as much as \$2,500 for them. You can see how this monopoly on appropriate Temple offerings created a great deal of abuse.

Jesus enters this Court of the Gentiles. He is indignant at what he sees. He drives out everyone who was selling and buying in the temple. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.

One of my New Testament professors, Dr. Willard Swartley, said, "If you want to see Jesus go into action, just cheat the poor and squeeze out the Gentiles!"

It is not difficult to see what angered Jesus. Pilgrims had journeyed for days to see God, to witness the holy, to worship his majesty. But before they were taken into the presence of God, they were taken to the cleaners. What was promised and what was delivered were two different things.

Jesus was angry at people who exploited others in the name of religion, and people who made it impossible for simple people to worship in God's House. For the God-fearing Gentiles, the boisterous area of commerce in the Court of the Gentiles was the only place in the Temple where they could worship.

This action by Jesus was not an impulsive show. It was not a temper tantrum. It was a deliberate act with an intentional message. According to Mark's gospel, Jesus went into the Temple late on Palm Sunday and saw the money changers. Then he and his disciples journeyed to Bethany to spend the night. Jesus went to sleep with pictures of this midway and its barkers in his memory. When he awakened the next morning, knowing his days were drawing to a close, he chose to make a point. He returned to the Temple.

JEREMIAH REVEALS HYPOCRISY

After Jesus drove out the money changers and the sellers of doves, he said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” (Matthew 21:13) Jesus’ quotation comes from the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Jeremiah’s famous Temple Sermon, and the leaders to whom Jesus spoke well understood it.

God called Jeremiah to preach this sermon to the Hebrew people as they were entering the Jerusalem temple sometime around 600 B.C. Jeremiah stands in the gate of the Lord’s house and speaks for God. He warns the people not to trust in deceptive words: This is the temple of the Lord. The people are deceived into thinking that just because they come and worship the Lord in the Temple that they will be all right.

Jeremiah asks the people: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offering to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are safe!’ – only to go on doing all these abominations?” (7:9-10)

He is identifying the inconsistency and the hypocrisy of the Hebrew people’s faith. How they worshipped did not match up with how they lived. We can be guilty of the same fallacy. We may be fooled into thinking that if we show up on Sunday or put some money in the offering plate that we have fulfilled our religious duty. Loving God and living as a disciple of Christ is a 24/7 adventure.

We are in the midst of a lengthy presidential campaign. I read recently about an episode of hypocrisy in another presidential campaign 100 years ago. A delegation called on President Theodore Roosevelt at his home in Oyster Bay, Long Island. The President met them with his coat off and his sleeves rolled up. He said, “Ah, gentlemen, come down to the barn, and we will talk while I do some work.” At the barn Roosevelt picked up a pitchfork and looked around for the hay. Then he called out, “John, where’s all the hay?” John called down from the hayloft, “Sorry, sir. I haven’t had time to toss it back down again after you pitched it up while the Iowa folks were here.”

Jeremiah bluntly confronted the Hebrew people with their hypocrisy. He describes their actions and sins as an abomination to God. In one verse he proclaims that they are breaking five of the Ten Commandments. He says, “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den or robbers in your sight?” (7:11) The Lord is watching, and God is not mocked.

Jeremiah predicts that the temple, desecrated by worshipers, and profaned by idolatry and social injustice, will be destroyed. Judah will be cast out of God’s sight. They will be carried off into exile.

As you might imagine, this message was very disturbing to the people coming to worship God at the Temple. Immediately following this prophetic sermon and call to obedience, Jeremiah is arrested. “The priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, ‘You shall die!’” (Jeremiah 26:8)

I hear Jeremiah’s words about following after other gods, and I wonder about us. In our American society in the 21st century, we have such an allegiance to money and things. We are addicted to materialism. We proclaim allegiance to God, but our actions reveal what we really worship.

I was in a seminar for pastors recently. The presenter said that the per capita level per adult for credit card debt in the United States is \$9,000. He said that if we were preaching to 100 adults on Sunday morning, then we were preaching to almost \$1 million in credit card debt. The seminar leader said that the average American adult spends \$1,100 a year on the lottery. You might as well drive down Interstate 40 and throw \$20 bills out your car window, as spend \$1,100 on the lottery.

The leader clearly identified our addiction to materialism when he shared that last year Americans spent \$12 billion to rent storage units. We spent \$12 billion to store stuff that we couldn’t keep in our homes -- \$12 billion.

We have a cross in our church as a symbol of our worship of the Son of God. But is the symbol of what we really worship a \$100 bill?

These words of Jeremiah call us to searing self-examination. How are our actions inconsistent with our faith? How do we demonstrate hypocrisy? Do we substitute religious rituals for being obedient? What would Jeremiah and Jesus say about what goes on in our lives and in our churches today?

A HOUSE OF PRAYER OR A DEN OF ROBBERS

Is the church a house of prayer or a den of robbers?

Today one of the holiest shrines of the Christianity, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, is located in Jerusalem. This church was constructed on the site of the traditional burial place of Jesus. If you and I journeyed to Jerusalem this Easter, this is what we would probably experience along the façade of that holy church. We would see the stalls of the vendors of sacred relics, of painted beads and inscribed ribbons. Vendors would be selling colored candles, gilded crucifixes, and bottles of water from the Jordan River. Sellers would be hawking their wares, bargaining with potential buyers – in front of this holy spot where Jesus' body was buried, a place that should engender awe and reverence and wonder.

1,500 years after Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem, the Roman Catholic Church was raising money for the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Johann Tetzel was the commissioner of the great German indulgence of 1517. This is how indulgences worked. Perhaps you had a father or a mother or uncle or aunt or other relative who had died and you were uncertain about their eternal destiny. If you paid a sum of money for their indulgence, the pope had power in heaven and earth to forgive their sins. If he forgave it, God must do so also. As soon as the coin was placed in the indulgence chest, the soul for whom the money was paid would go immediately to heaven.

You could purchase a spot in heaven for yourself and for your relatives. What an idea! Tetzal had a notorious jingle. The last line was: “As soon as gold in the basin rings, Right then the soul to heaven springs.”

Most historians believe that this great abuse of religious authority was the final straw that produced Martin Luther’s 95 Theses and began the Protestant Reformation.

In my own ministry I have had to dissuade parishioners from paying for prayer. Some television evangelists would write letters to my church members with this message: If you send me \$50, I will pray for your illness, and God will heal you. Do you see how wrong that is? It would be like our church saying that you have to attach a \$100 check to your prayer request card for us to pray for you.

In the midst of the abuse of religion, past and present, the presence of Christ cleanses our lives and our religious practices. When we follow Christ’s example and teaching, we are cleansed.

There were two responses to Jesus’ dramatic actions in the Jerusalem Temple 2,000 years ago. Once Jesus had disrupted all of the buying and selling, people who were blind and lame came to Jesus, and he healed them. Children saw what was happening, and they lifted their voices in praise to God, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” (21:14-15) The children knew instinctively that this was good and right and appropriate.

The chief priests and the scribes had a different response. They were angry. Jesus had disrupted their religious practices and challenged their authority. By the end of this chapter 21, they want to arrest Jesus. (21:46) A few chapters later they conspire to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. (26:3-5)

What about us? What is our response to Jesus cleansing the Temple? Is it confession, repentance, or apathy or empowerment?

I invite you to make your response as part of a guided prayer. I will ask you some questions to consider, and we will each make our own individual response. Let us pray.

Guided prayer: We begin by closing our eyes and moving into a quiet awareness of the presence of God among us. (Pause)

The Lord's love for each of us is everlasting, unending, deep, and personal. Sense Christ's tender, gentle care for you, surrounding and enfolding you, encouraging you and looking upon you with pleasure. For the Lord knows you and loves you as you are. He made you. (Pause)

In light of Christ's love, we need to remember and confess our sins so Christ can heal and forgive them. Thinking about today's sermon, what are the areas of your life where you failed to live up to what Christ created you to be? -- A time you disappointed yourself or hurt someone else by word or action. Hold that time in your mind – even though it may be painful. (Pause)

Lord Jesus, we give these sins to you, so you might work your healing upon them and upon the wounds they may have caused. Heal and correct their effects in our lives and in the lives of others.

Jesus Christ died on the cross so our sins could be forgiven. To live our lives in the fullness of his love, we must accept his forgiveness, giving him our sins and guilt, receiving his healing and correction. Know that the sins you have confessed are now in Christ's hands. They are no longer yours. You are forgiven. (Pause)

As Christ forgives our sins, he also grants us the power and the strength to repent and to change our sinful patterns of living, whether they are selfish, prideful or idolatrous. What areas of your life do you need to change – to turn from sin and move toward God? (Pause)

Accept Jesus' cleansing of your life. Receive his strength through the power of the Holy Spirit to change the areas of your life that need changing, so that you can honor and obey God. (Pause)

We make all of these prayers in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.