

Lent 3—March 3, 2024

Text: John 2:13-25

Theme: Church. Who Are We?

One of the great things about our Gospel for today is that we are reminded that the people of God have always struggled with who we are as God's people, who we are as the Church. It's not easy. We have always lived as refugees in this world where we are tempted to put down roots and build permanent lives, but we know that we are strangers here, and the people who are not God's people know it as well. They treat us like refugees who are not really part of their world. You have experienced it when you don't get invited to the party because everyone knows that you're a Christian. Or you don't get the promotion because you're clearly not that dedicated to the company when you refuse to work Sunday mornings or you put your family above the job. You know the feeling of being treated as backwards because you refuse to jump on the current cultural bandwagon that promotes things that God forbids. The people of Jesus' day had their own distractions from being the people of God. For one, they had become so consumed with the sacrificial system that they had turned God's temple into a business. Making money had surpassed the worship of God. In the Gospel for today, this was Jesus' first Passover since His ministry had begun with His baptism. Like all rabbis, He had come to the temple for Passover and He

noticed that His Father's house was more like a marketplace than a place of worship. Looking a little closer, He noted that the pilgrims were being ripped off. They were required to change their foreign currency into money without any graven images on it to donate to the temple. The money changers were not offering a fair exchange for them. They were being gouged. The sellers of animals for sacrifice were padding their profits as well. In other words, the bankers and merchants were taking advantage of the Temple of God. They were making a killing at the expense of God's people who were just trying to be obedient servants to the Lord.

Jesus takes a lot of heat on this one. He pours out the money changer's coins and turns over their tables and makes a whip of cords and drives out the animals and their keepers. It is unfathomable to me, but there are many people who claim to be Christian who dare to judge Jesus. They don't like a zealous Jesus who backs up what He says with force. They like the sweet Jesus in the manger and the nice Jesus who holds the little children on His lap but they don't like the angry Jesus who turns over tables and drives animals out of His temple. I think it is not a good idea to judge Jesus. I'm of the mind that if Jesus says it or does it, it is the right thing to say or do. He is God after all. So rather than focus on Jesus being angry, I prefer to focus on WHY Jesus was angry.

Jesus is angry because the people of God are acting as though the House of God is just another shop in the market. One of the models for church planting calls for people to plant churches in places wherever people already are. So sometimes you will see churches renting space in strip malls. It makes a certain amount of sense. The English District just recently had the opportunity to plant a mission congregation in a strip mall in Arizona. It was actually a very nice space but there was a free standing, very beautiful ELCA congregation just down the road and a nice, free standing LCMS congregation a couple miles away. It was decided that if someone was looking for a church in which to worship, he would be more likely to go to a free-standing building that was dedicated 7 days a week to being the house of God than to a storefront that was the house of God for a few hours on Sunday and a bank the rest of the week. While the building is not the Church, it is a reflection of the people of God who make up the Church. Our building is not Trinity Lutheran Church but our beautiful building is a reflection of what we believe about who God is and what He does in our lives. Jesus did not want the temple of God reflecting something that had nothing to do with God.

It is easy to forget who we are in a world that consistently tries to tell us to be something else. Are we a social service agency? Are

we a club? Are we just another 501c3 serving this community? Or are we the very body of God Almighty in Villa Park, Illinois? Are we the hands and the feet of Jesus himself as He dwells within us and moves us to proclaim His Word to the world around us? That is who we are. We are the body of Christ in this world and whatever we do in this space reflects the head of the body which is Christ.

Whatever we contemplate doing in this place, ask yourself, "does this reflect Christ?" "Does this serve His mission of baptizing and teaching?" "Are we helping people grow in their relationship to Christ?" If it does this, we are consistent with who God has made us. If it doesn't, we are getting off track and need to adjust our trajectory. If we use the compass of God's Word to guide us, what we do may or may not be popular or entertaining or financially profitable, but it will be true to who we are as God's people, and that is all that ultimately matters.