

Third Sunday in Lent March 7 2021

John 2:13-22

Some of you may have seen this meme, “If someone asks you “What Would Jesus Do”, remind them that flipping over tables and chasing people with whips is in the realm of possibility.”

It’s a funny line and sometimes has been used to excuse some rather abrupt, rude, or even violent responses by Christians to something they perceive as threatening the gospel. But is that really what is going on here? Jesus having a temper tantrum, standing up against the religious elite of his day and their corrupt practices?

This event is one of the few that appears in all four gospels. The difference in John is that it appears at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and not the end. It is also different because in John, Jesus does not accuse those in the temple of doing anything wrong.

In fact, the money changers and those selling animals were providing a valuable service for the pilgrims who come to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship God. Moneychangers exchanged *denarii*, the Roman coins which had a picture of Caesar on it, into half-shekels, which did not have any human images on it, so pilgrims could pay the temple-tax; animals were offered in sacrifices for ritual purity so the pilgrims could participate fully in the Passover. It would have been impractical for most of them to bring their own sacrifice on the journey from their hometowns, so having the animals there made it easier for them to fulfill their religious commitment.

All Jesus says as he uses the whip to drive out the animals for sacrifice, as he pours out the coins of the money changers and overturns their tables, is to not make his

father's house an "emporium", this is the transliteration of the word used. You might translate it as, "Stop making my Father's house a mall!"

All of these things- the money changers, the animals, the doves, Jesus says, are making God's house into something it is not. These things are also keeping those participating in them from seeing the truth that lies before them.

Jesus ends this text by saying "destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up." He's talking about himself. His resurrection. Jesus is the naos- the sanctuary- the holiest place in the Temple. Where the ark of the covenant resides. Where God is present on earth. Jesus is saying, now- I am this naos. I am the visible presence of God on earth.

In many ways, Jesus tossing things out of the Temple was a way of getting the attention of these Jews. It was a way of getting them to think and see in new ways. By throwing out the old understandings of God and how God worked in the world, it might just make room for the new understanding that Jesus was God's best self-expression to the world.

This begs the question, what do we need to toss aside so that we might clearly see who Jesus is and by extension, who we are? After all, in baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ that is the church. In that sense, we (both corporately and individually) are the naos- the sanctuary that Jesus talks about, the visible presence of God in the world. We are how people meet and see God in Jesus Christ. Is that who we really show them?

St. Augustine is known for this Lenten prayer which reads in part:

O Lord,
The house of my soul is narrow;
enlarge it that you may enter in.

I love this prayer- it captures for me the reality of life. The house of our soul is narrow- maybe because it is crowded with other things, maybe because it is just too small. It captures the reality of our relationship with God and faith- we cannot- by our own understanding or strength enlarge the house of our soul- only God can do that. Enlarge it- so that God may enter in.

The house of our souls is narrow, Lord. It is narrowed because we find your good news foolish. It makes no sense. Power that comes through weakness. Victory coming through being put to death. This is not how the world works! The house of our souls is narrow, Lord- enlarge it so that you may enter in. May your Holy Spirit blow through us and overturn the tables of our wisdom, drive out the compromise to this world, and give us new eyes to see your work in the world and in our lives. To see Jesus for who he is.

The house of our souls is narrow, Lord. Filled with all kinds of things. Good things that we allow to take up too much space- sports, hobbies, family, work. Bad things, habits and activities that do not build us up- addictions, self-destructive behaviors, hatred. The house of our souls is narrow, Lord. Filled with things that were useful, but now just take up room. Screens that suck up our attention, idols that we think will fill us and save us, ideas and words, people claiming to be truth- but which ultimately lie to us. The house of our souls is narrow, Lord. Enlarge it- so that you may enter in.

The house of my soul is narrow, Lord. It is small and I hold too many items close, thinking that they are what I need. But what I need is you. What I need is room in my life. Space so that you may fill it. The weeds need to be cleared out – competition for the seed of your Word, so that my faith might bask in your Son, be watered and nourished by your Word and Sacraments. Strengthened by the community that surrounds and supports me.

The house of my soul is narrow, Lord. Enlarge it, so that you may enter in.

It can be hard, this work of having our souls enlarged. Of disentangling ourselves from the past. Of letting go of what was or what might be. Of letting go of our own wisdom and trusting yours, of risking being found foolish in this world. It is hard to sort through all these good things and saying, “Yes, but maybe not so much”, “No, this is not more important than my faith.”

It is hard, so why even do it? Why even pray this prayer?

CS Lewis once wrote, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

Either this faith is about life and death. Either Jesus Christ is the only way to life, and that life with Christ is fuller and more abundant than life without Christ or we are all just wasting our time.

And as foolish as it sounds to those around us, we believe that the message of the cross is the power of God and through it we are being saved.

Can you pray this Lenten prayer with me? The house of my soul is narrow, Lord. Enlarge it that you may enter in!

What are we asking as we pray this prayer? Really?

To make room means to give something up- or at least modify it. I invite you to ponder this week. How much room is there in your life for God? For time spent in prayer. For time spent in reading and meditating on Scripture, God's word to us. For time spent in loving service to our neighbor. For time spent gathered with fellow believers around Word and Sacrament.

These practices are as important to our faith as exercise and eating healthy and getting enough sleep are for our bodies. And just like those things, they don't have to take up big chunks of time. You don't have to do spiritual marathons or be perfect. But we do need to make them priorities. To take 10 minutes a day for focused prayer and to listen to God (even as we pray continuously through out the day). To take 5- 15 minutes to read scripture and meditate on it a day, so that our faith might be well nourished.

The house of my soul is narrow, Lord. Enlarge it, that you may enter in!

The house of our souls is narrow, Lord. Filled to the brim with all that the god of culture says we must do. Send your Spirit upon us to cast out those things. Strengthen us through your Son to do the hard work of discerning what needs to go to make room for you. Surround us with fellow believers who will support us and speak truth in love to us. Through all of this, enlarge the house of our souls, raising the roof, pushing out the walls, throwing open the windows so that you might fill us; with your grace, your forgiveness, your peace, and your love. So that we might go and be the Body of Christ in the world.