

John 2:13-22

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The 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. ²²After 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.

[²³When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.]

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John 2: 13-25

Kerra Becker English

“Selling Chicken for Jesus”

Jesus knows what's in everyone. I believe it. He knows us at our best, which unfortunately means he also knows us at our worst. For me this story is a reminder that Jesus sees and knows in ways that we would rather not have him see and know. It was the time just before Passover. The temple was having its Spring Bazaar, except they were the marketplace for a lot more than just the bake sale and rummage items. They were selling animals for both food and sacrifice, the proceeds from which were probably going toward their building campaign. Remember how they chided him for saying he could raise the temple in three days when they'd already been working that project for the last 46 years?

I know this story. In my first call to ministry, one of the churches I served sold four or five hundred barbeque chicken plates every year during the two local fall festivals in hopes of one day putting a new roof on the building. Even after my six years there, they were still selling chicken, but the so-called roof project was well over a decade in the planning, and the most that had been done was patching a few shingles whenever it sprung a leak. Selling chicken had become a way of balancing the church budget. Perhaps like in this story of the temple, they had become chicken-rich

and faith-poor. Honestly though, I haven't had a chicken dinner to match it since. Temptation can be delicious – but ultimately it's not satisfying for the long run. Jesus never came through those festivals dumping out the change box, and pouring out our lemonade, and yet, that church's building and confidence both deteriorated past the point of no return. Selling the best chicken dinner in Altoona wasn't enough to save the day. Sadly, this story doesn't have a happy ending. Just a couple years ago, I got the news that the congregation was celebrating their last Easter together as Third Presbyterian Church.

I say this not because they were bad people who got the punishment they deserved for doing something Jesus didn't like. They weren't. Those festivals were a lot of fun and camaraderie for the congregation. For those two weekends a year, they pulled together. They worked hard. They absolutely thought they were doing what was best for the church they loved and the people they loved. But my guess is that the sellers at the temple felt the same way. They were only doing what they had always done. It was the traditional pre-Passover festival. As I imagine it, it was probably a lot like the spring opening of the Farmers' Market. These were the freshest and the best items brought for sale – to help the temple do its work. I would go to that kind of event. Church festivals, especially the ethnic ones, always have great food, and music, and usually something for the kids to do.

So why all the ruckus Jesus? Why take an event like this and turn it into a display of such anger and emotion? Why is it that there are those times when we feel like we're doing all the "right" things, and yet we end up doing those right things so wrongly? How will we know when we've made that turn from loving God and loving our neighbors to loving those "things" that remind us of God so much more?

What I said at the beginning really is that scary. Jesus sees inside of us, to the very heart of what motivates us as to why we do what we do. He knows when I am really giving my all, and when I've been holding back. He knows when my piety is sincere, and when it's just for show. He knows when I'm telling the whole truth and when I've given it a hearty sugar-coating for effect. Jesus knows when we love our institutions, and buildings, and programs and material things more than we should – because it's easier to love the church than it is to love God. You can't substitute selling chicken for being true to the gospel.

Here's where the story gets real. Sometimes we can't even see what's in our own hearts without someone revealing that place that has become dark and separated. I can tell you another story. Many of you have heard that I left my last ministry job in Tennessee without another job to go to. It was a scary time. I felt the call to go – but like a number of biblical stories, rather than being called "to" something, I was thrust into a time of wilderness wandering. Perhaps it wasn't really all that dramatic, I still had a home, I still had my health, my family was OK, but what I didn't have was a

job and a title anymore. For someone like me who had put all of my trust in my own success, it felt pretty bleak. I would find ways of telling people what I was “doing” with my time, but I felt like a failure.

Wandering through that wilderness one day, a colleague in ministry saw me out for lunch. Trying to be funny, she said to me, “Hey Kerra, how is it being unemployed?” That stung. The tables got turned over. The doves were let out of their cages. It took me awhile to figure out why that hurt so much, why it mattered so deeply. But it was because I had linked my own value as a person with the value of my job title. I had become what I did and I was no longer allowed to be a person who was already loved and cherished by God. As much as I think the comment was pretty awful, she probably did me a favor. She let me begin to see that spot in my own heart that needed healing. Now, when we make those biting comments to others, keep in mind that it means our own fears are well in play. And when you hear a comment like that, be aware that it says a WHOLE LOT about the person who is making it. My hunch is that her own fear of failure was triggered by bearing witness to what she saw me giving up.

Jesus had great zeal for the house of the Lord. If he didn't, he wouldn't have cared, he wouldn't have been stirred up into such a display of anger. He was always harshest on the hypocrisy. It was the good church people doing skewed things that made him absolutely furious. It was the displays of self-righteousness by the scribes

and Pharisees that made him do those things that stirred up trouble. He was willing to disappoint the pompous lawyer and the rich young ruler to make a point. He knows our secrets. These are the things we are able to hide pretty well under our cloaks of superiority. But we can't hide them from Jesus.

It's taken me awhile to learn this. Your run of the mill sinners LOVED Jesus. They got it. They understood the love that he was about. They had no pretensions, no pride, no preconceived notions for what righteousness had to look like. It's those of us who act like we aren't sinners that get caught up in the mess and feel Jesus' anger and disappointment rather than his understanding and forgiveness. It takes the anger and hurt to break through our defenses so we can see how we are really blocking ourselves from the love of God. God's love is always there for us, always ready to welcome us, and like the older brother in story of the two sons, we reject the party thrown for those we think don't deserve it and end up sulking in our own rejection. The good news is that we have choices. Jesus can get through to us and break the patterns of sin we didn't really even know we had. He can turn the tables, free the doves, drive out the sacrifices, and then purify the sacred space in us, the temple in us. A scriptural prayer devotion I read this week asked about your own sacred space, the space Jesus loves and is zealous to save, how is it in need of the kind of cleansing only Jesus can provide?

Merciful God, hear the prayers we raise to you for forgiveness, for the ability to recognize our own sin and cling to you rather than remain in our shame. Heal us and make us whole. Amen.