

Destroy this Temple, and in Three Days, I Will Raise It Up! **John 2:13-22**

Sanctuary

The Asbury Church Council has decided to reopen our sanctuary on Palm Sunday. I am very excited to see you at the church once again. As we prepare for reopening our sanctuary, I keep thinking of the hymn ‘Sanctuary.’ The song's lyrics are “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary. Pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving, I'll be a living Sanctuary for You.” Reopening our beautiful sanctuary is important but preparing ourselves to be a pure and holy sanctuary is equally important. I believe Jesus Christ teaches us the best way to clean the sanctuary in today’s scripture. How? By destroying the temple! I know it sounds quite radical, but this is a way to be a holy sanctuary for Christ.

Jesus disrupted The Temple System

Today’s scripture reading is known as “Cleansing of the Temple.” When the Passover approached, Jesus went to the temple. “He found the Temple teeming with people selling cattle and sheep and doves. The loan sharks were also there in full strength.” So what did he do? Jesus put together a whip out of strips of leather and chased them out of the Temple, stampeding the sheep and cattle, upending the tables of the loan sharks, spilling coins left and right.” He shouted, “Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall!” What Jesus did was more than a mere prohibition of commercial activities in the temple. Jesus was turning the temple upside down.

To better understand Jesus’ words and actions, we need to understand the temple system in the first century. Where is the center of the world economy today? One may say, “Wall Street.” Where is the center of political power today? It’s Washington, D.C. In ancient Israel, the Jerusalem temple was the center of economic, political, and religious life. The temple collected taxes and tithes from the people, so they had enormous financial assets. The temple functioned as a kind of bank, keeping treasuries and lending money to people. The temple run money-changers were there to exchange foreign currency for money acceptable to purchase animals and pay the temple tax while of course, keeping a 8% to 10 % fee.

Also, unlike today’s worship services, animal sacrifice was the center of worship in the ancient world. During the high holidays, such as Passover, many Jews made their pilgrimage to the temple. Every family was to sacrifice an unblemished lamb or doves. But bringing animals for the sacrifice from home to the temple was impractical and burdensome. Even if they brought their own lambs or doves, they needed to get approval from the priests that the lamb or doves were unblemished. A high priest’s family might run a business of selling ‘priest-certified lambs and cattle for sacrifice.’ They may advertise, “don't toil to bring your own lambs just buy a pre-approved sacrificial lamb! Limited Quantity!” The problem was that the prices of them were excessive. All these unjust temple commercial activities were done with the approval of the high priests.

But the most fundamental problem was that the temple system was designed to make consumers out of people and twist faith into a consumer-driven activity. To offer an unblemished lamb for sacrifice, one must carefully select a lamb from his own flock and carefully raise it until he brought it before God. Nurturing and careful examination of the sacrificial lamb itself is an essential spiritual practice. However, the temple system run by the high priests replaced this preparation process. All they needed to do was pay money and give the lamb to the priests. Then,

they would take care of the ritual performance. People became passive consumers of religious services.

The Consumer-Driven Church

We face a similar problem today. According to a recent survey (August 2016) by the Pew Research Center, “American churches have produced a generation of spiritual consumers who want little more from their religious community than a good pulpiteer, a satisfying worship service, and a congregation filled with nice, friendly members.”¹ The top four factors Christians consider in shopping for a church are: quality of sermons, feeling welcomed by leaders, style of services, and location.² Think of these four factors. What are they? These are services people can get from the church, spiritual commodities they can consume.

When we think of mission or church growth, we tend to consider these factors too. Right? “We need to change our worship style. We need more contemporary music. We need to be a more welcoming community. Of course, a preacher must be a good preacher.” We want to sell a better spiritual product so that people may come to the church. We have good intentions, but still, the result is spiritual consumers, not disciples. How did we get here? Regis Nicoll called this a perfectly designed result. Just as the temple system in Jesus’ time, made people into religious consumers, churches are developing consumers conditioned to judge a church by those marketplace standards.

Take a moment and think about whether you are spiritual consumers or disciples. I don’t know the answer. Only you know the answer. If you have been spiritual consumers, that’s not your fault. As clergy, it’s my fault. It’s our fault as the church. We need to repent and follow Jesus Christ. What we need to do is destroy the temple we have built.

Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up!

Jesus was overturning everything in the temple. Jesus was resisting the way religious leaders twisted faith into a consumer-driven activity. When asked, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up.” “Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up.”

We need to destroy the temple we have built so that Jesus can raise it up. How? The first step is changing our perspective and seeing things differently. When we reopen the church building, and everything gets back to normal, I bet you will sit in the same seat you always have on Sunday morning. Try to sit in a different spot and see things differently. In her book, *The Art of Asking*, Amanda Palmer shared her experience. She led a youth group program on the weekend. During that time, they had gone out to do a variety of outreach projects in a neglected neighborhood. They came back to town just after the Sunday worship service had started. So they slipped quietly into the sanctuary and sat in the back pew. Instead of her unusual spot on the platform, she was able to see the worship service from a different point of view. She saw pastors in black robes elevated on a stage, a congregation of people all facing forward, and an audience watching a performance. For the first time, she felt a disconnect, and it disturbed her. She realized how she had locked herself within the walls of the sanctuary. The temple would no longer be the center, but the real-life of faith happening beyond the temple door. The spirit of the risen Christ works not only in the church building but also in the world.

¹ <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2016/consumer-driven-church>

² Ibid.

We have focused on the gathering of the church. Worship, book study, Sunday school. We spend most of our energy maintaining the gathered church. When we think of a mission, the end goal is always to bring people back to the church. I know it's essential. But imagine what would happen if we broke this temple we have built and let Jesus Christ raise it up! How would our beloved Asbury Church change if we broke the temple and moved beyond our church walls? I don't know how we would change, but I firmly believe that Jesus Christ is calling us in this direction.

Easter Egg

One of the symbols of Easter is an egg. It symbolizes the empty tomb of Jesus from which Jesus was resurrected. The egg has life within it. It has been said, "If an egg is broken by an outside force, life ends. If an egg is broken by an inside force, life begins." The bird dares to break the shell. Only a dead bird would remain in the shell. When the shell breaks open, the bird can fly to the sky. With faith in Jesus Christ's word, let us break the temple we have built and let Christ raise it up. Break the shell and follow the lead of Christ.

I am planning to initiate a strategic planning team meeting. We will review what we have done and discern God's specific calling for our Asbury UMC. We will dream together and dare to break the shell. And we will fly together with the Holy Spirit. During this season of lent, please repent of being spiritual consumers and dare to dream of being the disciples of Jesus Christ. Imagine how our Christ will raise our beloved Asbury anew. Amen.