

Lent 3B

Message: What Are We Doing?

Sometimes in the wake of Jesus' actions, don't you want to ask him, "What are you doing! I can't believe you did that! What's gotten into you?"

In attempting to understand and focus on what Jesus did, the natural thing for us to do in our day and age is to look for comparisons to his actions and then find significance in them.

When we consider what Jesus' actions within the context of his culture we can begin to understand how offensive they were. By overturning the money tables, he prevented tithes and offerings from being made and received. By driving out the animals, he prevented sacrifices from being offered. In these actions Jesus overturned everything that the people of Israel understood as 'proper worship'. Further more, he chose the busiest holy day to go on his rampage! It was the preparation for the Passover, a day that there was sure to be lots of out-of-town visitors!

To give it some perspective, it would be as if I were to march into the sanctuary and in front of everyone proceed to destroy everything we are convinced is 'necessary' for worship. I set fire to the LBW and WOV hymnals, throw the offering plates out the door, and then just to make sure everyone is offended, I take an ax to the altar...and then the cross!

If I were to do such a thing, I can just hear the outcry: "What are you doing?! I can't believe you did that! What's gotten into you?"

It is important to notice that this is not exactly what the religious leaders asked of Jesus. While they were clearly offended and probably angry, they did not ask, "What are you doing?" They could clearly see what he was doing. That was not the question for them. The natural question for them was, "What sign can you give us for doing this?"

The religious leaders recognized that Jesus was acting as a prophet. As such, he did not simply walk around teaching, healing, or telling stories. It was the manner of the prophets of old to act out the message that God intended for the people to receive. Hosea went out and deliberately found a prostitute to marry to dramatize God's love for a people who were acting like whores with other gods. One prophet walked around naked for years to dramatize being exposed before God. The dramatic parts of their messages may have been contextually specific, but the messages themselves were timeless. So, the real question was not what was Jesus doing, but *what was he saying*, and *who told you to say this?*

So, what was Jesus saying? What was he expressing his Father's anger about? In Jesus' own words, ""Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." They were making money in the temple.

As recently as a generation ago, it was not uncommon for Lutheran congregations to have an understanding of these verses that forbid any sort of financial transactions to occur in the sanctuary. Business meetings or discussions of the budget were not allowed, and the annual meeting had to take place in the fellowship hall, never the sanctuary! Any sort of transaction, if they occurred on Sunday at all, were done outside, or in the Narthex. And you certainly didn't make change in the offering plate as it went by!

We chuckle about that: my goodness! We don't have a problem with behavior like that in this space! We're not concerned with that! What a narrow understanding of the gospel, we declare. Yes, perhaps it was. But the problem is that we want an explanation of Jesus' actions to be broad enough for us to point our finger at our neighbor today, but narrow enough not to include ourselves in the process!

Lots of people claim they want pastors to make the scriptures relevant to us today...well, here we go...

First, let's notice that Jesus took his concern out of the specific context of a building. He wasn't talking about this building any more than he was talking about that temple.

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body.'

He was talking about his body. His body...

The body of Jesus...

The body of Christ...

What's he talking about? What is the body of Christ?

We are! Jesus was saying, "You people – stop it!" Stop what? The people were making money, so why was Jesus offended at that? Try taking it out of the specific context of dollars and sense and let it speak in more general terms. To make money is to make a profit; to make a profit is to act in ways that profit ourselves, to act out of concern for our own agendas. It means to rally people around our personal pet peeves, pushing selfish ambitions by

trianguation and gossip. And doing it all "in the temple" – in our case, *as* the temple!

Jesus says, "Stop it! Whose house is this? Whose house are you, anyway? This is my Father's house; it's not about you!"

I don't need to take an ax to the pulpit to be considered offensive. All I have to do is what you called me to do: make the scriptures relevant and speak to each of us today. Proclaim God's Word of both Law and Gospel.

Here's the challenge for us today: remember our tendency to desire an understanding of what Jesus is saying in terms that are broad enough for us to point our finger at our neighbor, but narrow enough to not include ourselves? So, how does Jesus' action apply to you? Not to your neighbor across the street, not to your friend in the next pew or your family member beside you in the aisle. Not to the pastor in the pulpit – how does it apply to you?

Let's close by praying together the prayer that is printed in our bulletin. Let us pray:

Lord God,
Teach us to listen,
Write your words upon our hearts.
Teach us to listen,
We belong to you.
Humble our hearts we pray,
Quiet our mouths and still our ways.
Renew in us ears that seek
To listen as you speak Your Word.

Amen.