

John 2:13-22
March 15, 2009

South Plains

The Passion of Jesus

In the big scheme of things, South Plains Presbyterian Church is small potatoes. But, I must tell you that not a week goes by without telephone calls and letters looking for our business. Somebody wants to sell us a musical group, a credit card reader, a stewardship program, a ski trip, a Sunday School curriculum, floor mats, choir robes, electronics, legal advice – you name it. South Plains is a player in the business of religion because we are a consumer, a small business.

With that in mind, we should not be surprised or offended by the scene in John 2:13-22. First century Judaism had a business dimension to its religion just as we do. The scripture commands that certain kinds of animals should be sacrificed. It was not practical for Jews to travel to Jerusalem with animals to a major feast such as the Passover. Therefore, the temple provided animals. Roman coins inside the temple grounds were considered sacrilege. Therefore, the temple provided money changers who ran a service like the money changers in international airports. These arrangements seem crass and unspiritual to us because we live in a different time. But, they were ordinary in the first century as electric lights and central heating are in the twenty-first century.

But, the times were changing for the temple in Jerusalem. Most people didn't know it. Jesus wanted to call their attention to the changes and he did it dramatically, decisively, and in a way that no one could ignore him. In John's gospel the cleansing of the temple happens at the very beginning of his ministry. When a basketball player slams the ball through the hoop in the first minute of a game, he's making a statement, staking a claim that he owns the basket. That's what Jesus is doing.

Putting aside the issue of smelly animals in a holy place and dishonest merchants right outside the worship of Almighty God, Jesus is claiming ownership of worship. The temple stood as a witness to the God of the chosen people, a place where the Lord God promised to be present to his people and where people could draw near to God. No more! Jesus himself is witness to God, the revelation of God. Jesus is the center of worship. The arrival of Jesus is in fact God drawing near to his people. The temple is passé. Or, more to the point, temple worship has become a distraction from the worship of Almighty God. The business of temple religion has colored the attitude and judgment of the people of God. Jesus has come to draw them back to the center, back to God's presence, back to the practice of God's love.

That's always the temptation that comes with buildings and the business of being the church: that they will displace God in our hearts. It's not that business is bad in itself. Every session and church I've been a part

of comes to the place where someone will say reluctantly but firmly, “Yes, but the church is also a business.” That’s true. That is why we have a budget and pay our bills on time. But, the business side of the church always needs to be secondary. Money is the means necessary to accomplish the real business of the church which is to witness to the gospel by demonstrating a way to come near to God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus chose a moment when Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims for the Passover, the high holy feast of Judaism that celebrates the escape from Egypt and the creation of a nation called the chosen people. At the center of attention was the ornate and beautiful temple in the heart of the holy city, the place where pious Jews, the rich and the poor, would come. It was in the courtyard of the temple where the merchants set up shop in order to provide people with the necessities of worship. Jesus came equipped with a whip of cords. He drove out the sheep and cattle. He turned over the tables and poured out the coins. He made a mess that day.

It’s a wonder no one tackled him and threw him out. That day, for those few moments, he was the high priest in charge. His passion for the things of God drove his anger and righteous indignation. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” John’s gospel comments that later when his disciples had time to think about what had occurred, they remembered a verse from Psalm 69. “Zeal for your house will consume me.” In that psalm, the passion of

the psalmist stirs up so much opposition that the enemies of God threaten his life. Jesus’ zeal would take his life.

I was in a meeting last week where Presbyterian churches in the Charlottesville area are planning a mission trip to Mexico. Some parts of Mexico are dangerous these days. But, the zeal and passion for taking the love of Christ to a rural community outside Reynosa, Mexico was palpable. These missionaries are on fire. They’ve seen God at work in the lives of Mexicans, and they want to be part of that work, either this summer or in the future. I covet that zeal and passion for myself and for this church.

Of course, Jesus did not leave the temple unchallenged. The religious authorities ask him bluntly, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” It’s a politically correct question. They word their challenge as if to say, ‘You may have the authority to make these changes in the name of God, but we’d like to see your credentials, please. If you can demonstrate that you’re a messenger from the Lord God, we’ll listen to what you have to say.’ Now, we know from the rest of the gospel story that most of the Jewish leaders were blind to everything God was doing through Jesus. Nothing he did would change their minds.

With their intransigence in mind, Jesus replies to their challenge with a riddle. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

'Get out of here, Jesus. This temple has been under construction for 46 years. And, you're going to rebuild it in three days? Go back to Galilee.'

In order to understand this exchange, it helps to remember that the Gospel of John was written well after the resurrection. The readers of this story knew very well that Jesus had been raised from the grave three days after his body had been crucified, dead and buried. The ultimate sign of the power and authority of Jesus would be his resurrection. With a deadly literalism, the Jewish leaders focused on the destruction of the building called the temple. Jesus meant the temple that was his body.

There's more here than a prediction of coming events. John's gospel wants us to understand that Jesus himself is replacing the temple. Jesus is the witness to God's presence in the world. His incarnation has made God present in a concrete, visible way. Worship is properly directed toward Jesus the Christ. If we want to come near to God, he is our avenue into the heart of God. God has come to us in Jesus. The temple is overturned. Jesus is center of faith, not the temple, nor the church building; not the memorial baptismal font or any of the other accoutrements of worship.

It's possible to read this story as just another attack on the shortcomings of first century Judaism. Christianity is replacing Judaism. However, I don't believe the Holy Spirit would have inspired and preserved the story solely as an attack. I believe the gospel writer also intended it as a warning to the church. John's

gospel is especially concerned with worldliness, with the temptation to make following the world our passion instead of following Christ. This is a problem for every church of any size, living in any circumstances.

Some poor people, especially some middle class people, are more obsessed with money than the rich. Some churches, especially ordinary churches, can be so consumed with making the budget, with polishing the sanctuary, or even with expanding the facilities, that they lose their focus.

As important as the worldly, material business of church may be, the real business of church is centered around Jesus Christ and his ministry. I once bought a new set of tires that made the front end of my car shake. Fortunately, I had bought the tires from an older man with an instinct for diagnosing wheel troubles. He drove the car with me and accelerated until we reached 50 miles per hour. Sure enough the front end began to shake. He placed his open hand on the top of the steering wheel and felt what the car was doing. Then, he announced that one tire was not round. The center of the tire was not exactly in the middle of the axle. When he installed a round tire, the car ran perfectly. When the center of the church is not Jesus Christ, the church will have problems. The church may be shaken by conflict or it may just wear out, but it will not run smoothly or well.

God wanted to renew worship in his people by placing Jesus at the center. The renewal of our worship

depends upon keeping Jesus at the center, not only on Sunday, but Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

That is our focus and the center of our passion, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

God also wants to re-define the practice of religious faith so that the sacrifice of ourselves takes precedence over the sacrifice of animals. Jesus shows the way, and he invites us to follow. We are asked not just to give money and time, but to give ourselves, our passion and zeal to doing Christ's ministry.

Finally, God wants to re-work the faithful life to be more than taking care of religious things and religious rituals. We all have our rituals, the habits we follow because they once meant a great deal to us. In the church where I grew up, we sang "Holy, Holy, Holy" at least once a month. That's how we knew we were in church. I think I forgot to include that on my list of favorite hymns. That's an example of a good ritual. But, it's not nearly as important as a life that faithfully demonstrates the love and justice and righteousness of God.

Our mission statement says it well. We believe our mission is:

To worship God in joy and thanksgiving.

To witness to the good news of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ.

To serve the world through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.