

The Poetry of Lent:

Part 3: Defending 'The Temple'

Third Sunday in Lent

John 2:13-22
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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If you've already read the entry for the Third Sunday in Lent in the **Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent** devotional booklet, you're aware that she has a very different take on the familiar story known as "The Cleansing of the Temple." We'll take a look at her perspective near the close of this sermon.

The story itself is fairly straightforward. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, enters the temple, drives out the animals and the people selling them, and overturns the tables of the money changers. It's a story that appears in all four Gospels. While there are many similarities between them, there are also significant differences, especially in John. Perhaps the foremost difference is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke (together called the Synoptic Gospels), place this event near the very end of Jesus' life, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we refer to as Palm Sunday. For these authors, it is a pivotal event that leads directly to Jesus arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

This story is placed by the author of the Gospel John, however, at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Notice that it's in chapter 2. It immediately followed the first of six signs in this gospel, the wedding at Cana where Jesus turns water into wine. **The theological significance of John's placement is more important to him than chronological precision.** Arguments, therefore, about when it really happened, at the beginning or the end of Jesus' ministry, misses the point that each of the gospel writers is trying to make.

In the hands of the author of the Gospel of John, the story of the Cleansing of the Temple highlights that right from the very start of Jesus' public ministry **the abundant new life that he offers poses a challenge and threat to the existing religious and even political order – in other words, an overturning of the status quo, of business as usual.**

This story has often been interpreted as an exemplary example of righteous anger. It is clearly meant to place Jesus squarely alongside the Hebrew prophets of old who lashed out at injustice, hypocrisy, and the improper worship of God. This story has often been used by preachers, therefore, as **an irresistible call to action to take up our whips, metaphorically, and work to drive out our preferred injustices and abuses of power in our day and age. While that deeply resonates with those of us concerned with social justice issues, upon closer scrutiny we find that it is not quite that simple – as biblical stories rarely are.** So, let's take a closer look.

The historical setting for this story is the Jewish Feast of Passover, when the city of Jerusalem would have swelled to up to three times its normal population, causing all kinds of havoc and frantic activity. It's imperative to note that during Passover, cattle, sheep, and doves (the sacrificial animals used by the poor) were required for burnt

offerings in the Temple. Most of those making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem traveled a great distance and would not have brought animals with them. So, they needed to buy animals to sacrifice in order to participate in temple worship. Similarly, the temple tax could not be paid with Greek or Roman coins because they bore the image of the emperor's head on them – considered by the Jews to be idolatry. That money, therefore, had to be exchanged (no doubt with a surcharge) for temple currency.

So, ironically, **this picture of a wild open-air market was, in fact, a necessary practice for the proper functioning of the temple system.** And though there was no doubt abuses were inevitable, **these practices simply reflect a reality of Judaic temple worship in Jesus' day.**

Some biblical scholars have offered, therefore, that Jesus' protest wasn't so much about the practice itself – and certainly not an attempt to overthrow or replace the temple system – but rather where it was taking place – in the outer court of the temple, near the Holy of Holies that represented the very presence of God on earth. The outer court, by the way, called the Gentile court, was about the size of five football fields – so it is unlikely that with a horde of Roman guards stationed to keep the peace Jesus would have been able – or allowed – to clear that entire area of animals, sellers and moneymen. Again, literalness is beside the point to the gospel writer. It does indeed seem likely, however, that this story has a basis in an actual event in Jesus' life.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), then state that Jesus says, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of thieves." This is not the charge in John. He reports that Jesus says, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" **There's a big difference, isn't there, between a den of thieves and a marketplace?**

As always, it's important to ask what any of this has to do with us today. I don't think it's too much of a jump to look at this story from a Christian perspective and explore what it says if we approach this as "The Cleansing of the Church." **So, instead of approaching this story primarily as a call for us to take out our righteous anger on injustice and oppression, as important as that may be, what if this text pushes us to imagine Jesus entering our own sanctuaries, overturning our own cherished rationalizations, our upholding of the status quo, and perhaps even driving out much of what we think and do in the name of God?** Has Western Christianity, like the temple system before it, simply settled into comfortable behaviors that enable it to meet institutional goals, turning an increasingly blind eye to the possibilities of corruption inherent in the religious system itself? Perhaps worse, **how has Christianity in our country today turned the business of church into a marketplace? Let me count the ways.** And I'm not referring to the selling of Fair Trade coffee, tea, and chocolate in our Fellowship Hall. Yet also, how has a prevailing consumeristic approach and mindset to church life affected its ministry and sense of community?

Using this same biblical passage, poet Mary Oliver goes in a completely different direction. Instead of critiquing the actual practices of upholding of the status quo by organized religion, she looks outside of the box when it comes to defining the 'temple' itself. The devotional booklet includes an excerpt of her poem, "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?" It is printed on the cover of today's worship bulletin. Let's read it together.

*There are things you can't reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.
The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.*

She rightly reminds us there are some things we just can't grasp and hold onto as if they are ours to possess. Beyond literal things, like the wind and a bird flying away, Mary Oliver also applies this to our idea of God. And the next line in her poem is: "And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier." **We are encouraged, therefore, to keep reaching out.**

When she asks us to consider where the temple begins and where it ends, she pushes us to think outside the four wall of the church itself, and to **question the difference between what we deem as sacred and the secular.** In the meditation portion of the devotional booklet it states, "Jesus' love for the temple runs deep, and he challenges us not only to feel the same but also to **ask where the boundaries of "the temple" really are.** Does the sacred ground end at the sanctuary door? Or does it include the woods, the birds, and the sky, as both Oliver and Genesis 1 would suggest? Does the temple include Christ's own body, and so all of our bodies as well (John 2:21)? And if it does: how shall we fiercely love and defend "the temple" today?" **What would it mean for you to defend and protect 'the temple'?**

Our understanding of Jesus as the incarnation of the Presence of God extends to us, as well. Are we not, as the apostle Paul reminds us, also a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit – the Sacred Presence of God within us? So, **what if we were to expand our understanding of 'temple' to include all of creation. For if God is present everywhere and in all things, then all ground is holy ground, and all creation is holy and sacred.**

The care of creation itself is something we are called to put into practice. And in the process, let us not forget the warning to not turn it into a marketplace where we walk lockstep with the status quo and business as usual.

That brings us to the lighting of the candle for this week. The devotional booklet encourages: Begin each day by lighting a candle of courage, praying, "God of love, help me live today in ways that consecrate the world, defend the vulnerable, protect what is good, and honor creation."

[Light candle]

And now, if you so choose, repeat this same prayer after me:

God of love,
help me live today
in ways that consecrate the world,
defend the vulnerable,
protect what is good,
and honor creation.

Amen.