

“Out of the Way!”
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John 2:13-22

The first time I set foot inside St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, the first thing to catch my eye was a fairly large yet flimsy set of glass-topped counters and revolving kiosks, filled with all sorts of religious knick-knacks, from postcards to miniatures of the great Cathedral to a host of items not worth remembering. It made me sad, because I had come to St. Paul’s – part pilgrim; part tourist – looking forward to seeing those elegant mosaics that adorn the four corners of the central crossing of the nave, where far above loomed that giant dome, hovering as if by magic, so vast and inspiring. Instead, I arrived to find a portable gift shop, set up right there in the back of the nave, and what was worse, it seemed to me that this was the place where people lingered the longest to look.

The whole scene brought to mind the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. Ever since then, I’ve harbored a powerful reluctance to see things sold in churches, ample evidence to the contrary, I know. But truth be told, hosting the Fall Festival inside this space has always made me just a little nervous. I have comforted myself with the justification that all of the proceeds go toward charitable purposes. Yet I have also felt a persistent uneasiness, because of the echo in my mind of what Jesus did to those who were conducting commerce in the holy precincts of the Jerusalem Temple.

Repeated exposure to this story, however, has gradually yielded fresh insights which have liberated me. I no longer feel mild disgust over St. Paul’s gift shop and its location right in the middle of the worship space. I no longer feel concern over setting up stalls for vendors and Attic Treasures right here in the nave. Without that gift shop, St. Paul’s probably couldn’t keep its

doors open for worship. That's the sad part, not the fact of the shop being there. Without our nave, it would be harder to raise funds for worthy causes, and it's hard to see how using a holy space to help provide for those in need would offend God.

Beyond those practical considerations, though, there lay a renewed understanding of what this story is really about. It isn't about the practice of commerce being intrinsically impure, nor is the story necessarily about corruption in the Temple marketplace, though that could have been part of what incited Jesus to violence. The recent financial crisis certainly tempts the average preacher to use this text as ammunition for a verbal broadside against the unscrupulous, the irresponsible, and the stupid, who have very nearly brought our economy to total ruin. But that isn't what this gospel story is about, no matter how much we might want it to be.

I believe that Jesus cleansed the Temple marketplace neither for what it did nor for how it did it, but rather for what that marketplace represented. You see, in the cultic sacrifices of ancient Israel, the animals offered in the Temple had to be free from blemish, and a good way to insure that your animal met muster for sacrifice was simply to purchase one at the Temple from people who were certified to insure the animal's eligibility.

The money changers were there to help facilitate transactions and donations, because there were a number of different currencies floating around, just as today, and much of the coinage bore images of foreign emperors or false gods or other motifs unsuitable for the Temple treasury. So the money had to be changed into coinage that didn't bear religiously offensive images.

This whole elaborate system of changing money and buying animals was intended to better enable people to honor God properly. And I think that is precisely what set Jesus off.

Here was a group working to facilitate people's relationship with God, but Jesus saw them as ironically obstructing access by making things so incredibly complicated.

The money in your pocket probably wasn't good enough. You'd have to exchange it. The animal from your flock might not be good enough, so better play it safe, and get one from a licensed, registered raiser of high-quality, totally-pure, Temple-worthy livestock. What had been set up as a way to ease the exercise of religious responsibility was actually inhibiting it. Time people could have spent praying was wasted weighing silver on scales and haggling over the price of a goat.

Now it's true that nowhere do we read of what motivated Jesus to pick up a whip and make a big mess in the Temple marketplace, but we get a pretty good hint in verses 19-21, where Jesus claims that the Temple could be destroyed and then restored by him in three days. This seemed an impossible boast by those who knew that generations had toiled to rebuild the Temple. However, in verse 21 we learn that Jesus was referring to his body as the Temple of God, which would be raised on the third day after his death.

I think what motivated Jesus to violence was the terrible irony that not only were people being given the run-around in their attempt to worship at the Temple, but that their worship at that massive edifice was misdirected, because the real dwelling place of God had suddenly become HIM.

The access point to God was right there in front them, no intermediaries required, but people kept on doing on business as usual, enduring the bureaucratic ordeal to perform a rote rite, where only a precious few ever entered the actual place where God was said to dwell on Earth. Yet here was Jesus, God in the flesh, ready to talk to anyone who would listen, and listen

to anyone would wanted to talk; God in the flesh, ready to touch and be touched and eager to savor a good meal or enjoy a long walk with pleasant company.

I'm not saying that Jesus' radical actions in the Temple marketplace were a desperate attempt to draw attention. Rather his explosion stemmed from understandable outrage toward the farcical futility he saw all around him. So many people were trying so hard to dot every "i" and cross every "t" in hopes of forging a relationship with God, while God was literally *right there* and didn't seem to share their obsessive care around details of piety, because God had burst forth from the Temple and had become present, in Jesus, to anyone and everyone willing to approach him.

To what extent do Church practices inhibit rather than facilitate connection between God and God's chosen beloved children? It's not about being uprooted from a deep heritage going back centuries and conforming to culture by grabbing on to the latest fads in worship. But what habits might we have formed that may seem essential, but really aren't? What policies might we pursue that put us in a position similar to those Temple moneychangers and animal sellers?

These are uncomfortable questions, or at least they ought to be, because when Jesus comes back in all his glory on the Last Day, he's bringing more than a whip and will turn over more than mere tables, and we know it. The stakes are high, not just in terms of the potential consequences, but ever more so in terms of the immense opportunity.

For the Risen Christ, now as then, is literally *right there*: in the blessed bread and wine of communion; the word of God revealed in scripture; in your neighbor *and in you*, shining forth the light of Christ, no matter how dimmed that light might be by sin or disbelief. Getting to God doesn't require some kind of broker or expert. God wants to know us so badly, all we need do is

show the slightest reciprocal interest, and God will come on so strong, it might scare our socks off.

During this season of Lent, when we're working on penetrating the surface and exploring the depths, when we're working on stripping away the obstacles that intrude upon our relationship with God so that we can get down to the bare essentials, taking a fresh look at Jesus cleansing the Temple offers a corrective on an oft misinterpreted piece of scripture, while making us more aware of the necessary care to impose – absolutely nothing – between the God who is right here and the people he loved enough to live among, the people he loved enough to die for so that we might be saved. Amen.