

Third Sunday in Lent

John 2:13-22

Before we join Jesus in turning over tables and generally roughing up the Temple, I have a personal word I need to share.

I preach often from this pulpit and any other one that people will trust me with that God's calling on our lives is sometimes awkward, usually risky, and always difficult. I talk to college students all the time about what they think they should do with their lives and the frustrating work of sorting through where they belong and what they're meant to do with what they've been given.

I also talk a lot about church and what the church should do and be. In fact, last night, I went through some more recent sermons and was a little surprised at how much I talked about church, and what it should be about in the world.

Preaching about those things, the purpose of the church and the calling of God and all the rest, should exempt you from having to go through them yourself, if you ask me, but that is clearly not the case.

This past week, I received a call from my bishop to lead a church back home in Alabama, a job that I have accepted. This is not the first time a church has been offered to me, this is not the first time Mollie and I have struggled through the idea of leading a traditional congregation, but something about this time was different.

And it was different, frankly, because of all of you who show up on Sunday mornings. You have made me rethink what church could look like, and whether or not there could ever be a place for me there, fulfilling these ordination vows I have made in a more conventional way.

From the very first Sunday service here in Neu Chapel, when I spent all Saturday night worrying no one but Doug and Dianne would show up, until this morning, this hour has been the center of my work. My weeks have revolved around our time together, our breaking bread together, our raising our voices in song together. This hour we spend is my favorite part of my job, and that is saying a lot, because I love being a college Chaplain.

In fact, if you had told me five years ago when I started in Evansville, that when I left here, it would be to take a church in Alabama, I would've politely asked you if you were out of your mind. But I could not know then what I know now, how these Sunday services have shaped and formed something deep inside me I didn't know was there. And whatever that is, I need to follow it. I need to have the same courage I so routinely ask of my students.

So at the end of May, when the seniors are marching out of here in their nylon gowns and mortar boards, I will leave for something new as well. There will be a search committee put together soon to find the next Chaplain, and I hope all of you will give your advice towards that search. I know that several of you will have some anxiety around that process, but I want to assure you that I have no doubt that the right person will be found, who can take this ministry to new places.

Colleges are perpetually filled with goodbyes as we usher in new students only to see them go after a few short years, but that doesn't make saying goodbye any easier. But we have a few months together to talk about that. So my thought is to make this as long and drawn out and painful as

humanly possible.

I called a close friend who is also a pastor for advice on how to tell all of you, and she immediately said, "Don't do it during the sermon."

When I told her I was in fact going to tell you at the beginning of the sermon, my friend, who always preaches sermon series, said, "Well, you can't do your whole lectionary thing then. You can't go from telling them how much they mean to you to that passage about Jesus getting angry with the moneychangers."

But I am a stubborn man, born of a stiffnecked people, so we are going to talk about the lectionary. Not *just* because I am stubborn and I want to prove to my friend that sermon series are not the best thing since sliced bread, but because this worship experience is not about me or about you. It is about Jesus Christ. Whoever stands in this pulpit, whoever sits in those pews, the reason for gathering is the same.

Let us trust that this abrasive story about Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple still has a word for us this morning.

We are used to hearing this story in Lent, because it is often associated with the last few days of Jesus. Many scholars believe that Jesus' actions here in the Temple set the stage for him to be arrested and crucified. And sure enough, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this story occurs just before Jesus is arrested.

But notice where it falls in the Gospel of John. John places it at the very beginning of his story, in the second chapter of his gospel. The only thing Jesus has done at this point is turn water into wine, the first of seven miracles he will accomplish in John. This is one of the first things John wants you to know about Jesus.

We have no real way of knowing whether John had it right or the other three Gospels were the ones who knew exactly when in Jesus' life this happened, but what's important to notice about John's account is that he wants to separate it from the reasons why Jesus was killed. He wants us to have to wrestle with the story at face value, not just as a part of Jesus' final days.

It is almost Passover, the most important of Jewish religious holidays when Jesus arrives in the Temple. Because there are so many pilgrims making their way to the Temple for the holy days, the outer court is filled with persons selling their wares.

Let's be clear. These people are not selling Temple keychains or t-shirts. They are not trying to pawn the latest CD from the Temple Choir, or the best selling book about family life by the current head rabbi.

They are selling things people need for the holiday. Unblemished animals. Food to use during the Passover Seder. The only money you can use in the Temple is the Temple currency itself, so there are money changers set up to help pilgrims come and exchange their foreign currency so they can give their offering.

While it would be easier for us to imagine that they are all evil, greedy people out to distract us from God, that is not the case. They are there at the invitation of the religious leaders, helping the faithful perform the necessary rituals to commemorate these important days of Passover.

I brought this passage up in my worship class on Thursday, hoping they would write my sermon for me, and it was amazing the quandary we found ourselves in. I asked them a simple question, “What is the proper relationship of the church and money?”

One student pointed out that if churches sell t-shirts, it might bring someone else into the church when they saw that t-shirt, so that would be good, right? I asked if it was okay for a church to build a gym for its members to gather in for Christian calisthenics, and no one answered me. Someone else expressed discomfort at walking into a church recently and finding a bookstore there in the lobby, which made another student talk about the coffeehouse she had seen in the narthex of another church.

We ran out of time without getting to talk about the Christian music industry, or tv evangelists, or capital campaigns. Chances are, some of those things seem good to you and others seem bad.

I know whenever I read this passage before, I always imagined Benny Hinn and Jimmy Swaggart seated behind the money changers’ tables, but I’m not sure that’s fair. When we make out these people to be the bad guys, we are inserting some details into the story that are not necessarily there.

What happens if you read the story believing that these are rational, reasonable folks, many of whom are religious themselves? Then how do you react to Jesus walking in, and without a word, without a warning, making a whip and driving everyone out of there?

In the back stairwell of the Chapel leading down to Grabill, there is a painting of this scene. There is utter chaos, people are tripping over sheep and cattle, everyone is running in a different direction, and Jesus is leaning over one particularly unfortunate man, his whip held high in the air about to strike.

It is not a comforting image, which is likely why it is hanging in the back stairwell of the Chapel, and not somewhere people might see it.

John’s Gospel does not hang the picture in an obscure stairwell, though, he puts it up front. “You need to know this about Jesus,” writes John. “Don’t forget that he got angry, that he lost it,” the Gospel wants us to know. “Don’t forget that image of Jesus with the whip in his hands.”

My first real experience of church was in seventh grade, when my youth pastor took me and a group of fellow awkward middle schoolers out to a dilapidated house in a bad part of town, belonging to a retired fireman named Joe. As we climbed around on his roof and nailed down new shingles, my youth pastor kept saying things like “*this* is what the church does. *This* is what we’re about.”

To that point, I had assumed church was just my experience of Sunday mornings, where God wanted me to dress in clothes I didn’t like, and sing songs I didn’t understand, and attempt to wet down the cowlick that tended to stand straight up only on the Lord’s Day.

But sweating out in the hot summer sun, getting out of my own head and the suburban fishbowl I'd grown up in, spending a week not worrying about the dramas of middle school life, if this was church, then I was in.

That was the first time I ever heard the passage from Matthew 25, where Jesus talks about "the least of these," the poor and the suffering and the neglected, and the important role they get to play in the kingdom. Church was redefined for me that week: "*This* is what the church does. *This* is what we're about."

So, imagine my shock, several years later, when I was in the middle of seminary, having chased down a vocation in no small part due to that week on Joe's roof, when my same home church sent me a flyer about their capital campaign.

It quoted the "least of these" passage from Matthew 25, as if to say, to give your money to this cause was to fight for the justice God is after. As I scrolled down the sheet of paper, however, it became clear that the center of the campaign was an effort to build a fitness center for the church's members.

I suddenly had an image of Jesus walking through the treadmills and stairmasters, making a whip out of a jump rope, and driving the church's leaders out of the locker room.

When Jesus rages through the Temple, he declares that it will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. Those of us who know what's going to happen know that he is talking about himself, about the temple of his body.

But what we often fail to realize is how easy it is to forget what it means to follow Jesus. How easy it is to sink into habits and patterns that have nothing to do with the Good News. How one minute we can be on Fireman Joe's roof and the next we can be sweatin' to the oldies in our Christian gymnasium.

The potential for faith to become something other than faith is overwhelming. The temptation for Christianity to become a loose philosophy of self-help and pleasant thoughts is a real temptation.

We need to ask ourselves what we have allowed to clutter the Temple of Christ. We need to be honest about the things that are well-intentioned but do not serve the purposes of God. We need to be willing, in our theology and worship and faithful living, to remember Jesus' righteous anger.

We also need to remember that the Body of Christ, the Temple, is now us. The cleansing of the Temple is not just the job of the religious professionals and church administrators, it is the job of the church, of all of us.

"It took us forty-six years to build this place," the Jews tell Jesus. And Jesus replies that he can sort it all out in around 3 days.

Let us be willing, in this Lenten season, to welcome the Jesus that shocks us, the Jesus that calls us to difficult roads, the Jesus that leads the way into new life. Let us hear his voice, in a shout or in a whisper, "This is what the church does. This is what we're about."