

“Destroy This Temple”

John 2:13-22

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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Two weeks ago, we saw how after gathering together a coterie of disciples, Jesus’ very first act to inaugurate his ministry is to attend a wedding feast in Cana where, after the host runs out of drink, he responds by turning ordinary water into the finest wine. Only John records this account while it is absent from the others. We have to keep in mind that John’s biography of Jesus is very different from the gospels that Matthew, Mark and Luke construct. Where they recorded the scenes of Christ’s life CHRONOLOGICALLY, that is in regular HISTORICAL order, John intentionally re-organizes those same events THEMATICALLY, that is, for the purpose of creating a specific narrative about who Jesus is and the essential nature of his kingdom. By beginning his ministry in this manner, John is revealing right off the bat that Christ’s kingdom is like a great banquet where the food--the very life-giving sustenance enjoyed by one there--is not only ABUNDANT but of such SUPREME quality there is nothing else quite like it. Jesus has come to usher in a transformation unlike any they had ever seen- the beginning of a whole new era in people’s relationship with God and with each other. The old wine representing the Mosaic Law and the sacrificial system had run out and it is now giving way to something entirely NEW- all the old rites and rituals, rules and regulations which people had depended upon for their salvation are suddenly replaced by a WHOLE NEW FREEDOM IN THE SPIRIT BUILT UPON GOD’S GRACE AND LOVE. This wedding scene at Cana thus anticipates the marriage which the scriptures say will eventually take place between CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH. In the same way Jesus transformed ordinary water into the finest wine, once we’ve entered into a relational covenant with him, our ordinary lives then experience a whole NEW life with an entirely NEW future unlike anything we’ve ever known before.

Well this morning, we now look at what it means to BE THE CHURCH when he drove the money-changers and sellers of animals out of the temple, declaring, “Make not my Father’s house into a house of commerce!” Keep in mind what I said about the way John organizes the events in Jesus’ life in contrast to the manner in which Matthew, Mark and Luke do. The other three writers ALSO record this event, but where they place it at the END of Jesus’ ministry-- where it PROBABLY occurred--John places it at the very BEGINNING and, once again, for the purpose of revealing something very important about our Lord’s role and the nature of his kingdom, as we shall see.

Interestingly, in this scene, Jesus is portrayed in a very different light than we customarily think of him. This is NOT the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” portrait we’re familiar with, the Savior who welcomed small children and preached that we should love our enemies and even turn the other cheek when struck on the one side. Bearing the mantle of a prophet about his shoulders, Jesus is instead depicted as fearlessly attacking the religious leaders of his day. He denounced the scribes and Pharisees as “serpents” and “hypocrites; he called them white-washed tombs who though outwardly appeared righteous and beautiful were inwardly full of iniquity and dead men’s bones. Now with whip in hand and righteous indignation in his heart, he begins overturning the tables and driving the worshippers, the money-changers, and the sellers of animals out- an act that had to utterly shock the temple authorities. It was a fulfillment of

Malachi 3, where the Lord WARNED that he would send his messenger to prepare for the coming of the great day of judgment:

*Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord.(3:1-3)*

With this act, Jesus was essentially declaring that the entire temple enterprise with its corrupt priesthood was now dead. It was thus tantamount to placing a “this property is condemned” sign over the front door. Every Jew was required under their law to make the mandatory offerings in the temple. They came from all over the empire seeking “atonement” or reconciliation between themselves and God, and the sacrificial system was the one prescribed means for effectuating that. Because they came from such great distances, they could not bring their own animals which meant they would have to buy them from one of the many vendors stationed around the court- and, of course, at an inflated price. And because only temple currency could be used to purchase them, their own money had to be exchanged for it, ALSO at inflated rates. Many of the people were poor and ignorant and frequently duped by unscrupulous salesmen who overcharged them for their animals. Furthermore, they would have to pay an additional charge to have them inspected to ensure they were unblemished and thus fit to be sacrificed. Therefore, in every step along the process, the priestly aristocracy aggrandized themselves at the expense of many honest and sincere Jewish believers. This practice had gone on for centuries, a fact recognized by Jeremiah six hundred years earlier when he told them: “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the Lord...therefore I will do to the house which is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen...”

But Jesus' anger was directed at MORE than just the thievery perpetrated by the temple priests, it was directed at the ENTIRE SYSTEM of laws which had come to dominate and oppress the lives of God's people. Moses had given the Jews just TEN commandments to guide their lives by but over the years, the scribes and Pharisees had multiplied them again and again to where there were now well over SEVEN HUNDRED, most of which had NOTHING to do with God. Where the psalmist had once said that his delight was in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditated both day and night, it had now become a burdensome system of petty rules and regulations designed to make the people obedient to the whims of their religious leaders. The entire system was now all about control and self-enrichment at the expense of everyone else with nothing to do with the heart or spirit any longer. Mindless obedience to their man-made rules and regulations became MORE IMPORTANT than their relationship to God and to one another. THIS is why Jesus was so angry, declaring “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin while neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; THESE you ought to have done without neglecting the others. You are blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”

Where the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees had multiplied the number of commands seventy-fold, Jesus had narrowed them all down to just TWO which for him summed up the

essentials of the Law and the teachings of the prophets: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Like the Jewish prophets before him, he understood that God, his Heavenly Father, was not interested in the blood of bulls and goats but in JUSTICE and in FAITHFULNESS and, above all, in LOVE. He knew all-too-well the words of the Old Testament prophet Amos who had spoken to his people on behalf of the Lord centuries earlier:

*I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.(5:21-24)*

So when Jesus healed on the Sabbath to the fury of the religious leaders, he knew exactly what he was doing. He was not BREAKING the Sabbath but rather, he was FULFILLING it. He knew that God, his Heavenly Father, was primarily concerned about PEOPLE, about restoring their relationships with him and with others, about making them whole in mind and body and in spirit. As such, PEOPLE took precedence for him over any of Israel’s rites and rules and regulations which didn’t have the power to heal anybody of ANYTHING.

How easy it is for US to major in the minors and to minor in the majors just as those Pharisees and Sadducees had. When I realized I was going to be a minister years ago, I transferred from a large liberal arts university where there were very FEW rules to a small fundamentalist Bible college where it seemed like they had a rule for EVERYTHING. For instance, everyone had to be in their dorms by 10:00 p.m. regardless of how old you were. You couldn’t wear any beards or mustaches nor have hair below your collar line. There was no hand-holding with members of the opposite sex and certainly no smoking or drinking. Even such “worldly pursuits” as going to movies or playing cards or listening to hard rock music was frowned upon. We had to be in chapel five times a week and if you missed more than three during the course of a semester, you were dismissed.

However, as I grew and matured in my spiritual life, I was able to break away from a lot of the “legalism” that was then a significant part of my faith. I saw God LESS as a stern policeman waiting to beat me over the head with his stick at the slightest infraction, and MORE as a loving parent who knew and wanted what was best for me, one who desired nothing more than to enjoy an intimate relationship with me. When my father died, I inherited his collection of pipes which I puffed on until I gave the habit up almost twenty years ago, and I still enjoy heading over to the local pub with friends when we get together. When I pastored in Syracuse, I was part of a poker group made up of fellow church members, and my wife and I love nothing more than cuddling up to a good movie with a fire raging in the fireplace. Where such activities would have given my teachers fits back then, I don’t think my spiritual life has suffered any the worse for it. In fact, most of it now looks rather harmless and even QUITE SILLY. For instance, back in the mid 70’s, I did a four month internship at a church in Chico, California where the minister there once confessed to me how much he loved the voice of Tennessee Ernie Ford but felt he had to stop listening to him when he started to sing secular songs in addition to his gospel ones. Another time, I ran into the vice-president of the Bible college I was attending at the time at the local grocery store. While exchanging pleasantries, I happened to notice a

bottle of wine among the groceries he was purchasing. Looking rather sheepish, he explained, "Oh, yes, the wine, we just use it for cooking."

As time went on, I was able to separate that which was TRULY essential about my faith from that which was NOT, that instead of a lot of rules and regulations to guide me, I was developing an inner compass which was helping me to make right and responsible decisions. In retrospect, those rules which once figured so prominently in my life were a form of training wheels for me. By providing me with some structure, they kept me from falling down while I was learning to walk with one hand in Christ's. However, as I CONTINUED to mature in my sojourn with him, I learned to put aside those training wheels and trust more and more the little voice inside of me which would instruct me in the ways I should go. I found by intensively studying the Word of God and allowing it to mold both my mind and my conscience, and by trusting that God through his Holy Spirit was now applying those principles to my heart, that Christ was gradually taking root inside of me, shaping my life to his own.

As a result, I can confidently say that my entire understanding of ethics, that subject which I spent years studying and eventually received my doctorate in, can BEST be summed up in Christ's OWN summary of the Law and Prophets: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself," Here I find myself sympathizing with Abraham Lincoln who I spoke about in my sermon last week. I mentioned how he was never a Christian in the conventional sense, that is, as you and I may think of OURSELVES- he was never baptized, was never a member of any church, rarely, if ever, talked about Jesus Christ, and held most Christian denominations with all their creeds and dogmas with disdain. However, at one point he did confess why he took this position, saying:

*I have never united myself to any church, because I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their articles of belief and confessions of faith. When any church will inscribe over its altars as its sole qualification for membership, the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of both law and gospel, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself," that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul.*

But here is what I have found to be MOST damaging when faith is encumbered with a lot of empty and needless rules and regulations. Because the Jews were always so concerned about purity, they relied upon their laws to help them define that which was good from that which was bad, that which was holy from what was defiled. The effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries- between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. People who live by such laws often possess an air of superiority about them and they don't shy from appointing themselves as ARBITERS or JUDGES of what is right or true. Such an attitude can easily lead to the twin cancers of arrogance and pride.

JESUS, on the other hand, CHALLENGED the purity system in almost everything he did. He wasn't concerned with what others determined was acceptable and true; he was MORE interested in simply ACCEPTING others regardless of whether they were labeled good or bad, pure or not. When he encountered a sinful Samaritan woman, he wasn't put off by the fact she was a gentile with a sinful past. Rather, he conferred upon her the same dignity and respect he would any other person. When the woman accused of adultery was brought before him, he

disregarded those laws which branded her impure and refused to condemn her, having compassion on her instead. And during the last supper with his disciples, his final sermon to them concerned the place of love in their lives: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.” People would know they were his followers, not by upholding certain laws and precepts, not by maintaining artificial distinctions or boundaries, not by naming some pure and other impure, not by protecting the church from outside pollution, but by their deep and unconditional love for each other. A favorite gospel song of ours once said it best: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

As I reflect upon those years in Bible college, I realize now that when I no longer concerned myself with the “Thou Shalts” and “Thou Shalt nots” but, like Lincoln, focused instead on the two GREATEST commandments as specified by Christ himself: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself,” then my faith really began to take off and at last I started to EXPERIENCE that love and that joy and that peace which God through his Holy Spirit promises to all his children. When I learned to speak and act with LOVE as the dominant motive in my heart and theme in my ministry, when I stopped JUDGING others for not trying to live up to MY standards and started ACCEPTING THEM UNCONDITIONALLY, THAT was when I became a TRUE Christian.

The lesson here is that if churches would only concentrate on the WHEAT instead of the tares, there would be a whole lot more ministry and mission being done in the name of Jesus Christ. If only we would look for the GOOD instead of the bad, focusing on the POSITIVE instead of the negative, you can bet there’d be a greater number of people visiting our churches on Sunday mornings. If only we were more concerned about exhibiting the Fruit of the Spirit—that is, displaying more love, more joy, more peace, and more patience towards one another rather than complaining about everything and criticizing those who may be different or who don’t quite measure up to our own particular standards--then I believe we’d see a lot of the same ones who’ve left the church over the years return to our empty pews.

When we strive to be a church home that is open and tolerant and accepting of EVERYONE who walks through these doors, when we practice a love which transcends all boundaries and eradicates all distinctions REGARDLESS of what color one may be, or the kind of job one may have, or how much money one earns, or whatever sexual orientation one may possess, then we become the kind of church Lincoln sought and longed for, a church worthy of the name- “the Body of Christ.” Our churches must be a place where EVERYONE feels welcomed: young and old, black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Republican and Democrat- it doesn’t MATTER. Jesus reached across ALL lines and ALL barriers without ever judging ANYONE and WE can do no less. To do OTHERWISE would make us no better than the Pharisees who may have LOOKED and SOUNDED like they were righteous, yet all the while remained empty inside, dead to their God. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, we give you thanks for your compassion beyond measure. Draw us so close to you that we can rest secure in your love. Overturn the tables of every system that names some of your children as unclean. Comfort and disrupt us with your love. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*