

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 2:13-22 Third Sunday in Lent

March 19, 2006  
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13When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 15So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

17His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

18Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

19Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

20The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" 21But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Let us pray.  
O come Holy Spirit.  
Come as the fire, and burn  
Come as the wind, and cleanse  
Come as the light, and reveal  
Come as the water, and refresh.  
Convict, convert and consecrate us,  
Until we are wholly yours.  
Amen.

Two shiny quarters. When their edges rub against each other they make this kind of grinding noise, reminding me of the gears in a machine. Two shiny quarters are heavy enough to make their presence in your pocket known. If you're without pockets and have to slide the quarters into your shoe for safe keeping, they slip back and forth from your heel to your toes, sometimes lodging themselves in that little groove at the base of your toes. If you slide one quarter over the top of the other, you'll get a moment of resistance when the built up edge of the top coin encounters the built up edge of the bottom coin.

I know a lot about how two shiny quarters feel. Every Sunday that's what my folks gave me for the Sunday School offering. It was a challenge getting those two shiny quarters from our maroon Buick to the little velvet offering bag in the classroom. I had to hold on tight to them. Sometimes, if we were early to church,

the journey was even more perilous with a stop in the bathroom or a wait in the hallway until the Sunday School teacher arrived. But the quarters usually made it to their destination. It was my sacred duty to see that it was so. And while they were in my keeping, I treasured them knowing that they were going straight from my hands to God. Ah, those two, shiny quarters that my parents taught me to give over to God. Delivering those two, shiny quarters back to their rightful owner every Sunday gave me a sense of purpose and pride, surely God was pleased with those two shiny quarters.

And I try to recapture that spirit each Sunday when I write my check for the offering. Instead of thinking about my checking account balance or the other bills that need paid, I try to focus on that check like I used to focus on my two shiny quarters—infusing it with that same spirit my younger self had—a spirit of responsibility, honor, and excitement that grows out of having the opportunity to be part of something bigger than myself.

Bringing our gifts to God is an ancient custom, dating back to Noah who—upon disembarking from his long journey at sea—built an altar, made sacrifices to God, and worshipped God. Indeed, God later went on to command Abraham to offer the ultimate sacrifice--to give his own son as an offering to the Lord. The ancient Israelites built an altar to God as they traversed the desert wilderness during the Exodus, disassembling and reassembling it as they journeyed along so that they would always have a place to bring their offering. The Hebrew Law, the Psalms and the writings of the ancient prophets contain numerous references to making offerings to God.

And so, can you imagine the people's confusion and dismay when, as they were entering the Temple during the Passover to buy their livestock to bring to the altar

of God as an offering, just as their sacred scriptures told them to, can you imagine how they might have felt when Jesus stalked into the temple courtyard—his eyes filled with rage, his body cloaked in fury. The people surely were taken aback, even afraid, when he began flipping over the vendors tables and chastising them for making the place a market when—for centuries—they had been doing this very thing under the teachings of their leaders.

Now, a little background information. It was the season of Passover. Many Jewish people would have traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem, our setting for this story, to celebrate the Holy Feast. In fact, Jesus himself had traveled from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem for the same reason. It was custom, and indeed the law, to bring a sacrificial offering to the Temple for such a religious holiday. But, because folks were traveling long distances, it wasn't feasible for them to bring the fatted calf or blemish-less goat all the way from home. Instead, they brought a bag of coins and purchased animals to sacrifice once they arrived in Jerusalem. And that's what was likely going on here—the vendors were selling animals to tourists so they would have something to sacrifice at the altar in the temple, just as they had been taught.

And so what is Jesus' problem? Why all of the wrath and messiness? This is not the Jesus of storybooks and Sunday School songs. This Jesus is angry and confrontational and, well, he's not being very nice.

And that's exactly why this is one of the gospel stories that I most appreciate. I'm glad that our Messiah is patient, loving, forgiving, and merciful. But a Messiah who gets ticked off and speaks his mind—now there's someone I can relate to. It's nice to see that Jesus, even Jesus, got angry and so it's okay if we do too.

But that's not really the point here. The question is, why did Jesus get so mad. I grew up thinking that Jesus got mad because folks were selling stuff in the Temple. The lesson I took away with me as a child was that you shouldn't sell stuff in church. And so we left the Christmas Wrapping Paper and Candy Bar school fundraising order at home.

But it's still bigger than that. It's gotta be. In this moment of anger, Jesus turns the tide of history. He declares that this is his father's house. From the most ancient of days the tabernacle, then the Temple that replaced it, was the place on earth where God dwelled. In calling the Temple his father's house, Jesus makes a bold declaration about his identity as the son of God. In scattering the merchants and upturning the money changers tables, he is declaring an end to the old ways of the previous temple regime and begins to establish a new way, his way.

But why the anger, the whip and yelling? I try and imagine myself as a little girl in that time—my two shiny quarters replaced with two lovely doves for sacrifice. I've come all the way from Nazareth and it's my first time in Jerusalem. My folks have coached me on what to do and just as I'm about to enter the Temple, I'm surprised and frightened by this man yelling, pushing things over, and whipping at the animals to drive them away.

And there in is likely where the rub is for Jesus—that the Holy Day, indeed the Jewish faith in general—had been boiled down to making a few sacrifices once a year and that was it. It's not so much about deterring folks from making an offering, but more about how making a necessity of making an offering, deters folks from worshipping. Imagine if we had an expectation or requirement for what you brought this morning for an offering? What if, during the children's message, we checked to make sure that each child had two shiny quarters before they were

allowed to go to Sunday School? What if you had to show your offering check to an usher before you could enter the sanctuary—like your offering envelope is some kind of a ticket stub that proves you paid your dues and you're worthy to enter. What a terrible distortion of the idea of offering in particular and worship in general.

And we can't imagine doing such a thing. We go out of our way to make sure that giving is considered an opportunity, not a burden. We make every effort to assure that the ability or inability to make a financial offering to God through this church doesn't hinder someone from worshipping here.

But what do we do, or don't we do, that might hinder other pilgrims--much like the chaos and demands of the market place in the Temple hindered the poor and sick and helpless from worshipping in the temple in this story? Where are we missing the boat on hospitality, accessibility and welcome? If Jesus walked through those doors right now, what about us might cause him to have a reaction similar to the one he had in this passage?

Obviously, we would hope that there's no such thing in this church, nothing that would elicit such a response from Jesus. But surely we're not perfect and Jesus would offer us a critique, helping us to see how we're hindering other believers-or would be believers-on their faith journeys. He would open our eyes so we could see how we're buying into the status quo instead of speaking out for the poor, oppressed, and helpless. He would open our ears to how our gossip and secrets divide us and distract us from our faith journey. He would open our hearts to the sick, lonely, and grieving—not only those in our midst but those in our community.

It reminds me of a new series of McDonald's commercials. It pains me to use this ad campaign as an illustration because I disagree with so many of the company's environmental policies. But, I have to admit that they've really tapped into the culture. The slogan they use in these commercials touting their new higher brow coffee is "Wake Up To Your Life." And, in a way, that's how Jesus used his anger and frustration in this passage—to help folks to wake up to their lives. To help them to understand that they've been buying into a corrupt system at the expense of the very ones their faith tells them to love and take care of. And, I guess, that's why all of the anger. Surely they'd heard the message—Do Justice, Love Kindness, and Walk Humbly with your Lord, over and over again. And yet, they weren't living into that reality. I guess it took that kind of an outburst—that shocking of a display of emotion—for Jesus to get his point across.

And again, that's why we observe this season of Lent—it helps us to wake up to our lives. These Bible readings, these services, this music, the stories we're hearing each other tell, offer us new insights and perspectives into our lives. They are designed to grab our attention and shake us up a bit, just like Jesus' behavior in the Temple shook up the folks of that time. And so let's let ourselves be shaken up—be vulnerable—and be open; for in being these things we open ourselves to the grace and joy of true Christian discipleship.