

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

I'm going to do something a little different today. Rather than give a sermon that I would hope warms our hearts, I'm going to offer something more akin to a class presentation that hopefully engages our minds a bit. My reasoning is that the story of Jesus cleansing the temple probably doesn't warm too many hearts. So maybe if we dig deeper into the story, then we can emerge from it with something that we can apply to our lives. I might even have some interactive parts to this. Sound good?

First, I'd like to start by acknowledging a problem that I will likely always have with this text. No matter how much nuance you and I may give to understanding this passage, in the end it still depicts Jesus as at least causing a commotion at a place that was holy... and continues to be holy... to countless numbers of people. The Temple was the central location of worshiping the God of Israel. Jesus wasn't disrupting the holy part of the temple, but it was adjacent to it. We don't have an

equivalent place in Christianity where we can say “This is the most holy spot.” *So my first question: Do you think of this room as a holy space?* Okay. An adjacent space to this room is the Narthex. *My next question: Would you appreciate it if someone purposefully started upending everything in the Narthex?* If someone did, it would be impossible to forget, and it would be very hard to forgive. That is basically what Jesus did, yet his actions were on a much larger scale simply due to the heft of holiness the Temple area represents to so many people. So some people will never look on this story favorably, and I hear them. Coupled with that, this story has been preached and taught that way countless times in Christian spaces that has left listeners with a dose of anti-Jewish sentiment. I believe, however, that when we dig into the story and its context, an anti-Jewish view was not the intent of the gospel writer John, or at least not the main intent. I’ll get back to that in a bit.

Where this event took place was in the outermost area of the Temple grounds. This was called “The Court of Gentiles,” which meant this was the designated space for non-Jews to come and pray to the God of Israel. Gentiles were invited to pray here, but they were not allowed to enter the areas even closer to the actual Temple. Now, the requirement for Jews was that at specific holidays they needed to come and offer a sacrifice at the Temple. That meant most Jews undertook a journey to get to Jerusalem, and it was hard to travel with livestock. So the practice was that they would purchase an animal at the Temple. Of course money was exchanged for this. *Next question: How many of you have heard it said that the exchanging of money was the problem?* [show of hands] It wasn’t really. The problem that Jesus saw when he entered the Temple complex was that there was no place for Gentiles to come and pray to God. The purchasing of animals for sacrifice wasn’t the issue. That was supposed to be done. So it was the right practice, but done in the wrong location. The commotion of the animals and the people selling them was uncondusive for any Gentile to have a moment to pray to God. The problem comes down to an unwelcoming atmosphere for outsiders. So, one takeaway is that we at All Saints need to think through how welcoming of a space and our community are to all people, so that all people know they can come here to encounter God. To quote Pastor Ginger, “All means all, y’all.”

I’m going to put in a plug for the Thursday Morning Bible Study. That group spent an hour this past fall digging into the Greek of this gospel passage. So they already know this next part, and

I'm going to condense it a lot for the rest of us. *Next question: When it says Jesus made a "whip of cords," what exactly comes to mind in terms of material?* The Greek of this passage is clear. It says that Jesus made a "whip of rushes," as in grass. Okay, then. Where did he get this grass? It was the hay the animals were eating. Then the question remains, "On who or what did he use this whip?" Long story short, there is a phrasal construction in the Greek that is easy to overlook. This phrasing points to only the sheep and cattle. Our English translation in our bulletin gets it right by saying that it was the sheep and the cattle. However, many translations get it wrong and they make it sound as though he used the whip on people.

Alright. So we've covered most of the text itself. Now we have to get into the context of the gospel of John. John was the last of the four gospels to be written, and the consensus is that it was written around the year 90. It would still be a long time before the movement that followed Jesus was understood as something separate for Judaism. At the point of this gospel's composition, the community that John was writing to still understood themselves to fall under the umbrella of Judaism. What happened twenty years prior to this writing was earth-shattering for all people under that umbrella. In the year 70, the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. This was soul crushing for every Jew, including those involved in the Christian sect of Judaism. Everyone under the umbrella had to ask how they would adapt and move forward. For Christians, Jesus became the stand-in for what the temple once stood for. Hence, John gives his community the explanation in verse 21 today. Some others under the umbrella, like the Sadducees and the Essenes, were not able to rebound from what Rome did. These groups went extinct. But not all. *Next question: Does anyone recall the other sect of Judaism that was able to adapt after the Temple's destruction?* The Pharisee sect. For the Pharisees, the act of teaching and learning about Torah – the Law – became the stand-in for what the Temple once stood for. Hence, there was a shift toward rabbinic Judaism and the flourishing of communities centered around synagogues instead of the one Temple.

Just because some groups were able to adapt doesn't mean that they were no longer upset about what Rome did. Destroying the Temple was still an egregious act of oppression. The people that John was writing to were in the year 90 were still righteously angry by this grave injustice. *Next question: If you have ever experienced righteous anger, is it helpful for someone to come along and say, "There, there"*

or “*Peace be with you*”? No. You want that person to be angry with you. The problem John had was that a prevailing theme of his gospel is that Jesus brings peace. The night before his death he says to the disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” The first thing he says to his disciples after his resurrection is, “Peace be with you.” So when John’s community is still righteously angry about the oppression of Rome, they need to see that the one who is now the Christian stand-in for the Temple is able to respond to injustice with anger as well. That is a theory about why this scene in John’s gospel is the main showing of Jesus’ anger. It lets those Christians in the year 90 see that – like them – Jesus also cares about the Temple, and – like them – that Jesus can get angry about the Temple as well. I believe it is probable – though not conclusive – that John’s intent with this short narrative was to write an anti-Roman passage of scripture, and not an anti-Jewish passage. That said, Christians in subsequent centuries have unfortunately frequently used it for the latter.

So what are some takeaways for us today? First, whenever someone preaches or teaches that Christianity is the replacement of Judaism, that is wrong. Second, the Greek tells us that Jesus didn’t resort to physical violence against people. He overturned tables, and he used a fistful of hay to drive away animals, but he didn’t whip people. Some Christians justify violence because of this passage, and they are wrong. Third, the original audience heard in this story Jesus connecting with their anger over the Roman destruction of the Temple.

Finally, when someone today cries out in pain over an injustice, how we listen and respond is important. You and I are called to be a people of peace. However, telling someone who is facing an injustice to “have peace” is the equivalent of telling them to roll over and let the abuse continue. There is a time to be angry, and that time is when injustices happen. The question we must answer is how to best express that anger while still being a people of love and peace. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this; it is something we discern together as a community, which also means that we won’t always get it right. It requires practice. Through the repeated work of pursuing justice together, we learn from our mistakes, dust ourselves off, and we continue – once again – to be a people who embody in this world God’s peace, love, and justice.

Amen.