

Series: Depths of Love
Sermon: I Will Raise It Up
Scripture: John 2:13-22

Third Sunday in Lent
March 3, 2023
Dr. Jim Brooks

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

About forty years ago, the summer after I graduated from Appalachian, I went to England with a group of English majors and two of our professors. The first Sunday we were in London a couple of my friends and I got up early to get ready for church. We went to Westminster Abbey, one of the oldest Anglican churches in England. Queen Elizabeth's Coronation and funeral were held there. Prince William and Kate Middleton were married there.

Having grown up in a rural church I looked forward to worshiping in a large stately cathedral with centuries old Christian traditions. I wasn't prepared, however, for what I found that Sunday morning. Much to my surprise the church grounds were teeming with tourists and vendors hawking souvenirs and trinkets. There were food carts selling hot dogs and pretzels. Tourists were swarming the grounds taking photographs and video oblivious to the church's purpose, especially on a Sunday morning. I overheard an usher turning them away as they tried to enter the cathedral. He said the service that morning was to dedicate the new mayor of Westminster. I told my friends to follow me; I had a plan.

I knocked on the massive cathedral doors and an usher soon opened wearing a tuxedo with tails. I said, "We are here for the service." "And what service would that be," he asked. "The installation service for the Mayor of Westminster, of course," I replied. Much to our surprise he said, "Right this way." and proceeded to lead us all the way down the long central aisle and to seats in the transepts with a wonderful view of the altar. This is the experience I think about when I imagine Jesus approaching the temple that day, fed up with the chaos he had to go through in order to get to worship.

For some time the situation outside the temple had been worsening. The sale of sacrificial animals, once conducted farther away from the temple, had gotten closer and closer. The influx of people, particularly travelers, had increased the need for money changers. The temple had become a spectacle. It is not as if Jesus had just walked into this situation, shocked by what he

saw like Moses coming down from the mountain to find the children of Israel worshipping a golden calf. No, Jesus had seen this spectacle before, he had watched each year as the tables moved a little closer to the temple, the noise level grew a little louder, and the quiet peace of God's holy presence was drowned in the circus-like atmosphere promoting things that had so little to do with worship. So this day, he would choose not to just walk past and accept what it had become. Today, he would be angry.

Anger is a very human emotion. I won't ask for a show of hands, but I dare say we can all recall a time in our lives when anger overcame us. If we acted on that anger, we may have come to regret it: losing our temper in traffic, becoming impatient in long lines, snapping at a waitress only to find out it is her first day on the job. I find my anger might better be called venting. Things reach a boiling point, and the thing that tips the scale usually isn't something big or important. Often my anger is misplaced. I am tired or frustrated with something else and lash out without thinking.

Ryan Martin, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin, has spent his career studying anger. He has found that the thoughts that we have in response to the first flare of anger are what can either send us over the edge — or help us harness the emotion for good. At its best, Ryan explains, anger is “our fight or flight response, kicking in to energize us to confront injustice.”

I think this is where the anger of Jesus is different from ours. Some believe Jesus was reacting to the greed and sale of sacrificial animals, others contend that it was the overpriced exchange of Roman money into Jewish coins that could be used to pay taxes at the temple. Still others believe that the temple was offering high interest loans to the poor whose land was about to be confiscated by Rome. No matter which, Jesus uses his anger to confront injustice; he is not just having an emotional meltdown.

Imagine the time it took Jesus to make that whip he used to purge the temple that day. James 1:19-20 says, “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Jesus' actions show us the truth of those words - he didn't just fly off the handle, he was slow to anger... purposeful...intentional.

We sometimes see Jesus' display of anger as out of character: it doesn't seem like the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount talking about how the meek shall inherit the earth. Was Jesus showing a human weakness that day? His anger was not a weakness. It was moral resolve. Even though Jesus is fully divine and fully human, it was not human weakness that shone through that day. Jesus overturning the tables was his characteristic way of turning situations on end, whether it be Jewish law or other social mores of his time. We have seen him do things like this all through the gospels: healing on the Sabbath, offering grace to the woman at the well, eating at the table with sinners and tax collectors, giving mercy to those the world said were unworthy. I believe

that Jesus flipped the tables not in some hot-headed, emotional way but in a calculated way to say that things are no longer business as usual. Jesus was acting with righteous indignation.

In this Lenten season, it is fitting that our lectionary scripture gives us a story of a cleansing, a purging, a disruption of the status quo for our lives are in need of those very things. This season gives us the symbolic space to confront those things in our lives that distract us from worship.

When bystanders are upset that Jesus has upended the tables and questioned his authority to do so, he responds by reorienting us to the true center of worship...God and God's work through Jesus. When Jesus says they can tear down the temple and he will raise it in three days, he is talking about his death and resurrection. Worship, in its purest form, points us toward God's resurrection promise.

Through worship we are raised up to have an encounter with God. We are being raised up when we come together like we have today to sing, to pray, to commune with one another and to commune with God. We are asked to consider: What honors God? What intention do we bring to worship? Have we made worship a priority in our lives? What barriers have we set that might hinder us from worshipping more genuinely?

Earlier in the service I asked you what brought you to church this morning. You might be interested that in a recent Pew Research poll, 8 out of 10 people say they come to church to feel closer to God. An equal number say they regularly feel the presence of God at church as well as a sense of community and a connection to long standing traditions. As United Methodists, our worship is drawn from century's old traditions rooted in the traditions of the Jewish temple and traditions around the table of Jewish homes. Our prayers, our creeds, and our hymns connect us to a rich tradition that has brought those who worship closer to God. We honor that tradition as we seek to honor God each week in worship.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the sacrament of baptism with the Jones family. Today we observe another sacrament of the Church as we are invited to this table for Holy Communion where we are offered the blessing of forgiveness and where we can commune with God and one another, through the body and blood of Jesus. Perhaps this table has been overturned as well. Like Jesus, who welcomed all to his table, The United Methodist Church welcomes all to ours. By doing so we too take a stand for justice and join in God's resurrection story.