

John 2-13-22
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Sacred Sanctuaries

What do you expect to find when you enter into a sanctuary? Peace, quiet, wisdom, an encounter with the Divine? When Jesus entered the temple that day I'm sure he was expecting these things. The Passover was near, that sacred time when the Jewish people focused on the Exodus Event, which reminded them of God's deliverance. To hear the ancient Scriptures read, and worship God together was and still is a deeply meaningful and sacred time. For Jesus, that time was even more important because he knew that God's deliverance was about to happen again, this time through him. And so, on a human level, I'm sure he hoped to find sanctuary and refuge from the impending storm of his life and his death that was unfolding.

Yet, when Jesus arrived at the temple what he found was far from sanctuary. The scene must have seemed so unreal to him. Instead of prayer and worship, there was chaos, and noise, and business transactions taking place. Now, in all fairness, the temple at that time *was* like a marketplace. The Jewish people sacrificed animals in the temple and they had to be animals that were without blemish or marks. So the religious leaders sold their animals – rather than another market - to those coming to worship, but often at a much higher price than anywhere else. And the people who came to worship had to exchange the Roman coins with the image of the emperor who was worshipped like a god, with the Jewish money that could be used at the temple. The reason for this was so that the people wouldn't be using coins with the image of another god on them in the temple, for it would have been seen as though they were worshipping a false god by using those coins.

That would have been seen as breaking God's first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Sometimes, the people who were the poorest couldn't even worship, because they couldn't afford to pay their way into the temple. This is what Jesus was really angry about – the way they were treating each other. They didn't set out intentionally to break God's laws, but their zeal or passion to do everything right, was actually causing them to become blind to what was happening. They were actually back in slavery – not with Egypt – but to an institutional system of injustice that treats people with inequity and less than beloved children of God. That's what Jesus was really trying to overturn that day.

Today, we are all enslaved in a system of societal and institutional injustice too, and it needs to be overturned as well. Our laws are inequitable where only a small number of people benefit at the expense of others. Money is often valued more than people. And unfortunately, our religious institutions are guilty as well. Congregations in their zeal to have a perfect worship experience quickly forget the reason for gathering. Arguments over the right way to do things, concern over declining numbers while at the same time not wanting to reach out and welcome new ideas and opinions from others, actually keeps us from a deeper connection with God and each other. We – like the religious leaders in our gospel text today – can become so comfortable with what's unhealthy that we don't even recognize it. We can become blind to what's real and what's not. It's easy for us to miss God in our midst.

In conversations with colleagues this week, we spoke about the term virtual worship and how maybe that's not a great description of what congregations are doing during this time of pandemic. The very definition of virtual means "not physically existing as such, but made by software to appear to do so." In other words, the term virtual implies something is not real. It only appears real. Thinking about this further, it seems that calling worship virtual implies that it's not really real worship. What is real? Certainly, turning a temple meant to be a sacred sanctuary into a marketplace

as Jesus encountered would seem more like virtual worship, rather than real worship, because they weren't focusing on God. While we may not have actual marketplaces going on in our church buildings, when we are distracted and thinking about all the things we have to do after we leave the building, are we any less guilty of focusing on the wrong thing? There are many places that are sacred sanctuaries. Some are within buildings, and some are found outside in nature. Yet, all of these places are sacred because God's Spirit abides there. Throughout history there have been times when people couldn't worship together in a church building for a variety of reasons – war, imprisonment, detained in a refugee camp, in a hospital, during plagues, or even now during this pandemic – but that doesn't mean that real worship and sacred places cannot be created.

We all miss being in our church buildings during this time of pandemic, but when we were actually in our buildings, were we there and actually present to worship God, or were we only there physically, but not with our whole beings – body, mind, and soul? Perhaps this time of pandemic has overturned not only our way of gathering together physically in our buildings, but overturned our way of thinking to understand *how* we actually worship. Right now, we may be meeting online for worship, but if we are truly present with all our being – body, mind, and soul - then it is indeed real worship. We are gathered together, maybe not in the same physical room, but we are gathered together by the Holy Spirit in this online space and it is indeed sacred time. It is a sacred sanctuary – a place where we encounter the Living God– and we are changed by this Divine encounter.

This is what Jesus was trying to reveal to the religious leaders that day in the temple when he overturned the way *they* were doing things. Jesus said that the primary temple or dwelling place of God was not in a temple built by human hands, but was found within him. Jesus said he was the temple of God. Jesus was reminding them of the Passover and the time when the ancient Israelites wandered in the wilderness carrying the Ark of the Covenant – the place where God was believed to

dwell – and calling them to see that God was once again portable within himself. God is too vast and too great to be contained in a single building. God became incarnate – lived in the flesh of Jesus. He was not just a virtual appearance of God. He was God in the flesh, and that was hard for the religious leaders to grasp at that time. They thought it was blasphemy.

It's hard for us to really understand it fully today too. Too often the church and society has looked at our human bodies as dirty, less-than, and not sacred. And we have believed these lies. We don't always value our bodies, do we? We often put them down by stating all the things that are wrong with them – we're too short, too tall, our weight's not right, and so many other flaws. And we do this to each other too. But God chose to become enfleshed in a human body in the person of Jesus, and therefore says that human bodies are good enough – good enough to be a temple, a sacred place for God to live or dwell in. And because the Holy Spirit lives within each one of us, we too are the temple of the Holy Spirit where God abides. St. Paul echoes this when he says in 1 Cor. 3:16 “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?” Jesus says the temple of God, the sacred sanctuary that we seek is found not in a building, but in him, and within each one of us.

To call ourselves anything less than sacred is, in fact, the real blasphemy - for nothing God has created, nothing God dwells within can be anything less than sacred. The anger, hatred, prejudice, and cruelty that we show toward one other – and even Earth - is a result of us not seeing all people – all creation - as created in the image of God, and not seeing God's Spirit within each person. Especially on this day, March 7th, we remember March 7, 1965, known as Bloody Sunday when so many Civil Rights leaders – including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. risked their lives and died as they were peacefully marching and attempting to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in Selma, Alabama. They were doing what Jesus called them to do – to peacefully, yet confidently,

speak to overturn the institutional systems of injustice that oppresses so many people of color to this very day. Jesus calls us to continue the work he began to overturn these systems of injustice that oppress God's beloved people. It's not easy. Look what happened to Jesus, but as he said, "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The power of the Holy Spirit who raised him from the dead, is with us today, strengthening us, and giving us courage to follow in Jesus' steps.

When we can truly look at each person, see and listen to each person, honor each individual as the place where God's Spirit abides, then we will treat them with the genuine love, kindness, compassion, and grace of God. Then and only then will the systems of societal and institutional injustice be overturned. When we value people over money and power, we will truly be worshipping God by valuing and caring for each other. We will no longer seek to find sacred sanctuary, but we will embody it. Amen.