

"CLEANSING THE TEMPLE"
March 3, 1991

TEXT: John 2:15-16 And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade."

I can not think of anything in Jesus' life that distresses people more than the story I have just read. We remember with joy that sweet, helpless child lying in the manger. We take comfort in the man who told us God is like a loving Father. We can even face the cross, for we know how the story ends. And we revel in the Resurrection with its message of undying hope.

But here, in this morning's scripture, we find a very different Jesus. Here he is not sweet; he is not gentle; and he is certainly not helpless. We see him taking pieces of rope, probably those used to tether sacrificial animals, and wielding them like a whip to drive both animals and sellers out of the temple. We see him knocking over the tables where the money changers sat and thrusting out those who sold pigeons. This is not the holy child, "meek and mild." This is Jesus the whirlwind. And we are not quite sure what to make of him.

We wonder what happened to his compassion, to his understanding. We wonder how he could be so angry --and why. We may even wonder if that same anger might not someday turn against us. About the only people I know who do not find this passage disturbing are those who, themselves, are angry and see in it permission for their own rage.

Or perhaps those who see Christ's anger as directed only at others. Years ago, in my first church, I once preached a sermon that was meant to be challenging. On the way out, one lady said to me, "You really lit into us this morning didn't you?" Trying to sooth what I thought might be hurt feelings, I answered, "Well, you know, it does us good to be challenged now and then." To which she quickly replied, "Oh, I'm not complaining. The way I figure it, if the shoe fits, let them wear it."

Well, this morning I would like to turn that around. I would like to say, "If the shoe fits, let us wear it." Let us look at this story and see what it has to say to us. For, to my way of thinking, it says a great deal. I do not know whether Jesus was really angry or not. This story appears in all four Gospels, but nowhere does it say he was angry. Yet, angry or

not, he was certainly making a point. And that is what I would like us to think about this morning.

First of all, let us try to understand the story in its own right. Why were those animals there in the first place? Why the money changers? And why was Jesus so upset about it?

Well, believe it or not, the animals were there as a service. Jewish temple worship was based upon animal sacrifice. That might be hard for us to understand, but it might make more sense if you remember that, in early times, their wealth was almost totally in their flocks and herds. If they wanted to give God something of value, the only thing they had to give was one of those animals.

As a result, a whole system of sacrifices gradually developed, different animals for different purposes and different levels of income. But, then as now, there were some who wanted to pull a fast one. Who tried to give God, not the best of their flock, but the worst. Sick or blemished animals that were not worth much anyway.

So the law required that every sacrifice must be "without blot or blemish." Now, many of those who came to the temple, lived some distance away. And, rather than take a chance that their sacrifice might be rejected, in which case they would have to go back home to get another one, they would simply buy the animal right there at the temple, an animal already certified to be acceptable.

And the money changers served an equally good purpose. To support the temple, every Jewish male had to pay a yearly temple tax which amounted to about two days' wages. But the tax had to be paid with a special kind of money, one which had no image on it. Pilgrims from all over could go to the temple and exchange their own coins for the image-less coins of the temple. Like those who sold animals, the money changers provided a service.

Unfortunately, however, both services easily became rackets. Animal inspectors could always find something wrong with sheep or goats brought in from the outside, and temple animals sold for two or three times their fair market value. And the money changers always charged exorbitant fees for their services. That is what bothered Jesus. God's temple was being corrupted by the very people who were supposed to protect it.

But what does all that have to do with us? Just this. We, too, are the temples of God. In First Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 16, St. Paul writes: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

But have we not also allowed our lives to be cluttered with things which either have no business there or have been put to the wrong use? Do not the temples of our lives also need to be cleansed? Do we not also have money changers and sellers of

pigeons that need to be driven out?

That is one purpose of Lent. Perhaps the things that clutter up our lives are not bad in themselves. Perhaps they had a purpose once, even a good purpose. But, if they no longer serve that purpose, if somehow they have come between us and God, then now is the time to get rid of them. Now is the time to open our hearts and lives to the cleansing power of Christ, to let him do some "spring cleaning" of our souls. I know it is not easy. I have enough money changers in my own temple not to understand that. But, with God's help, anything is possible.

That is one way this story relates to us. But there is another way, too. One that is especially pertinent now when it looks as if the war in the Persian Gulf is over. I know we all rejoice in that. But, as President Bush has said, now begins the hard work of winning the peace which our brave young men and women have so gallantly earned.

The one thing I kept hearing again and again as members of our armed forces are interviewed on television is that they did not want to have to come back, or to have their children or grandchildren come back, to do the job all over again. I do not think we want that to happen either.

The world is God's temple, too, and it is our job to cleanse it. War, by itself, never solves anything. As anyone conversant with twentieth century history can tell you, the treaty which ended World War I, almost guaranteed that there would be a World War II. We must be careful not to let that happen this time.

I do not know what you saw as you watched the pictures of Operation Desert Storm on television, but I can tell you what I saw. I did not see any "Nintendo combat" or antiseptic warfare. I saw a technology so terrible as to make the thought of future war unbearable. It will not be long before many nations have weapons that will threaten to destroy the earth. We simply have to find ways of making war as unnecessary as it is unthinkable.

In my January 20th sermon, the Sunday after Operation Desert Storm began, I quoted President Lyndon Johnson who wrote, ". . . Vast problems remain, conflicts between great powers, conflicts between small neighbors, disagreements over disarmament, persistence of ancient wrongs in the area of human rights, residual problems of colonialism, and all the rest. But men and nations, working apart, created these problems; and men and nations working together must solve them [emphasis mine]."

As I said at that time, that is not only the job for presidents, and secretaries of state, and ambassadors. You and I must contribute to that process, too. And we can do so by starting right now --in our families, in our churches, in our neighborhoods, in our businesses, to sow the seeds of love and compassion, of justice and fair-play. And by praying that, with God's help, what we sow may somehow grow (like the mustard seed

in Jesus' parable) until it shades the whole world. There is no other way. The temple must be cleansed. And it must be cleansed now --before it is too late.