Sunday, March 3, 1991
CLEANSING OUR TEMPLES
John 2:13-22

We cannot understand this story of Jesus going into the Temple courtyard in Jerusalem and driving out the merchants and money changers without also knowing something about the significance of the Temple and its history.

It's difficult for us to even imagine today how important the Temple in Jerusalem was for the people of Jesus' time and throughout the history of the Hebrew people. Jerusalem was the holy city, and the Temple was the holy place of God in that city. Indeed, to many, it was more than a symbol — it was the center of their religious faith, the place where God dwelled. One part of the Temple, the "Holy of Holies," was so sacred that only the high priest could enter it one time each year. No one else would even approach it, nor could anyone else see inside of it because it was separated by a heavy curtain or drape.

The original Temple had been built by King Solomon in the tenth century B.C. and had, from that point on, become the center of the Hebrew nation's religious and political life. Even in the 6th century B.C., when the Temple lay in ruins for about 70 years as the result of the Babylonian conquest of the Kingdom of Judah (586 B.C.), sacrifices still took place in the Temple courtyard. The Temple Mount (called Mt. Zion in Jerusalem) continued to symbolize, in prophecy and tradition, God's relationship with God's people. Even today, that mount in Jerusalem is considered the most sacred and holy place for Jewish people.

Despite the fact that the Temple's existence for over 1,000 years was nearly continuous, it did undergo two major reconstructions. The first was when the Jewish people returned from exile in 520 B.C. Remember, it had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The second major reconstruction was part of the enormous building projects carried out by King Herod, long before the birth of Jesus.

Because of these two rebuilding projects, it is customary to consider the Jerusalem Temple as having three distinct stages of existence. The first Temple has always been known as Solomon's Temple. The second Temple was rebuilt on the site of its destroyed predecessor at the end of the 6th century, and the third is often called "Herod's Temple" because of how he enlarged and embellished it.

The Temple was again destroyed by Roman legions in A.D. 70 and has never been rebuilt. Ironically, today in Jerusalem, the Muslim shrine called "the Dome of the Rock" or the Mosque of Omar stands on the Temple site.

The importance of the Temple in the religious life of Jews at the time of Jesus is evident in the New Testament. The birth of John the Baptist was announced in the Temple, and the sacrificial offering that was made for every firstborn Jewish male child was offered there by Mary and Joseph for Jesus. The Temple was also the place where the future prominence of Jesus was announced by Simeon and Anna. Jesus' religious significance was first seen in the Temple when, at age 12, he was found by his parents talking with the rabbis there. We also know that Jesus taught in the Temple area when he was in Jerusalem. And then there's this story in the Gospels of the anger of Jesus and how he chased out the merchants and money changers.

This is the only time in the Gospel stories where Jesus is described as being very angry. All four Gospels tell the same story, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke place the incident near the end of Jesus' ministry during Holy Week, a few days before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. During the last week of his life, it's easier for us to understand the anger of Jesus. His critics had been picking and poking at him for months, and he could see the opposition growing. However, the Gospel of John puts the cleansing of the Temple very near the beginning of his ministry. At this point, no one has said a word against Jesus. On the contrary, everyone has been quite impressed with him. Perhaps the writer of the Gospel of John put the Temple cleansing near the beginning of Jesus' ministry to show that Jesus had come to cleanse the religious practices of his time in order to give people a fresh awareness of God.

Maybe the writer of the Gospel of John also chose to put this story right up front because he wanted us to know the sort of God who had come among us in Jesus. If anybody thought that Jesus was only a nice young man, meek and mild, and that nothing could upset him — here we're given a different picture. Our little cause-effect religion makes him mad. It is a violation of the holiness of God.

What was going on in the Temple that caused Jesus to be so angry? The Gospel of John describes the scene: "In the Temple, Jesus found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables... 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. He said, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace.'"

These commercial activities in the Temple were nothing new. They had been going on for some years. However, there's more to this story than at first meets the eye. One Bible commentator put it this way: "We read the text too narrowly if we see here only a warning against Bible bookstores in the narthex, or raffles for the youth group, or bingo in the fellowship hall. The issue is carrying our pervasive acquisitiveness right into our worship."

Jesus was against the prostituting of religion — the use of one's religion for false purposes, in this case, the making of a profit by appealing to one's religious beliefs. Jesus wasn't against legitimate profit per se — but these vendors and money changers in the Temple court had a monopoly.

Think of it this way — suppose we set up a Bible booth in our narthex here and required worshippers to have Bibles in the worship service, and further implied that the Bibles they bought here were especially blessed by God and therefore better than any other Bible, and if you bought one here, your life would be especially blessed by God. That's prostituting not only the building but the Christian faith which the building is supposed to represent. It's using God for false purposes. Whenever people try to make a profit by promising or implying that God will uniquely bless the purchaser, that's wrong. It's a temptation for all of us. We like to think that God will do our bidding on our demand. We are tempted to believe in magic more than mystery. We hear it all the time — pray this prayer, send this money, and God will bless you.

Incidentally, it's not only in the church that we try to use God for our own purposes. Business people do it. Politicians do it. Governments try it. People have tried to say: "God is a capitalist," or "God is a socialist."

Jesus, in cleansing the Temple, was trying to call it back to its original purpose. It was to be first and foremost a place for worshippers to experience the presence and holiness of God. It

had become more a shopping center than a place for worship. In other words, it had become a place of idolatry, a center for the worship of false gods. Not only was Temple commerce the idol, but Jesus was implying that the Temple itself had become an idol. People were confusing the Temple with God. Many people of that time had come to believe that the only true worship of God could take place in the Temple.

It's a good reminder for us in the church today. We need, from time to time, to investigate whether or not the church of which we are a member is fulfilling its original purpose, or has it become something quite different? Has it become mostly a social club, a shopping center, or a place where we try to escape from life?

The church building itself can become an idol. If this beautiful building we use for worship were completely destroyed today, would this congregation cease to exist? No. Our faith is not in this building, but in God. Furthermore, this congregation, as a gathered people of God, would continue to exist. The holy presence of God cannot be contained in any building or institution. The church as an institution, building, or specific denomination can become a form of idolatry.

Jesus was saying that if the Temple in Jerusalem were destroyed, God would still be the Holy God. God's presence would be among people as much as before.

However, in the Gospel of John, there are always several levels of meaning in stories such as this one. This Gospel account says that later, after Easter, the followers of Jesus, in looking back and remembering this incident, connected it with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. They believed that when Jesus said, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up," he was speaking of the temple of his own body and therefore of his death and resurrection.

It reminded them that in the same way as the deep faith of the Hebrew people could not be done away with if the Temple in Jerusalem were destroyed, so also the faith of the followers of Jesus could not be destroyed with his crucifixion because, with God, there is always resurrection. God is always making things new.

And there is yet another level of meaning in this story. In the New Testament, we are reminded again and again that we are to think of our own bodies as Temples of God. In his letter to the Church at Corinth, the Apostle wrote, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" The early church used this analogy over and over again.

When we think of our bodies as Temples of God, there are several implications we need to consider. First, remember, since our bodies are holy, they are not to be abused or misused. Good health habits are a necessity for those who profess to follow Jesus.

On the other hand, we can also make an idol of our body in the same way that the Temple in Jerusalem came to be an idol for some. There are those who worship the body too much. They become obsessed with the body and with keeping it young, thin, and beautiful, and in so doing mistreat and abuse the very body which they are trying to maintain.

As Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem, we need also to cleanse not only our bodies of impurities but our lives. We all have our own private idolatries and demons. To emphasize this, in one part of its history, the church developed the concept of Purgatory as a way of reminding us as followers of Jesus that our bodies and our lives are in constant need of cleansing and purifying. Unfortunately, later on in its history, the idea of Purgatory was itself misused by the

church's leaders, and it was one of the corruptions of the church that Martin Luther worked to correct.

Later in this worship service, the Plymouth Choir will sing an anthem called the "Demon Chorus," from the musical work, "The Dream of Gerontius," by Sir Edward Elgar. The song reminds us of the demons and impurities which are all the time trying to take control of our lives. I've asked the choir to sing that anthem this Sunday because it speaks of the cleansing of the temples of our bodies and spirits which all the time needs to be taking place.

Any human temple, be it our body or an institution, no matter how holy we claim it to be, can be corrupted. The story reminds us that only God is holy. The good news in the story is that God can always make all things new — even us. Amen.