Sunday, March 2, 1997
WHAT IT MEANS TO CORRUPT THE HOLY
John 2:13-22

During the season of Lent in this sermon series, we are looking at some of the unique teachings of Jesus and discovering how they relate to us today. The title of the first sermon was: What It Means To Repent. When Jesus used the word "repent," he meant more than simply being sorry for your sins. To repent means to question your assumptions, to be open to a new understanding and experience of God and God's creation. Because of your new understanding of God as revealed in Jesus, you are then willing to turn your life around and go in another direction.

The title of the second sermon in this series was: What It Means To Deny Yourself. When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him, he is asking us to voluntarily accept life's difficulties and problems as opportunities for spiritual growth. God never promised us that life would be easy, but God does promise to accompany us on the journey. By denying yourself and connecting yourself to a higher purpose, you get yourself out of the way and can deal with life's difficulties more effectively.

Today, in the third sermon in this series, we are considering a story about Jesus that is found in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The story, as recorded in John's gospel, is being used as the text for this sermon. In this story, what Jesus wants to teach us is associated with a dramatic and surprising action on his part. Here's what happened: Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. When he entered the temple, he found merchants selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, "Do not corrupt what is holy."

We cannot understand this story and the principle it illustrates without also knowing something about the significance of the Temple, its history, and its importance in the life of the Hebrew people.

Jerusalem was the holy city, and the Temple was the holy place of God in that city, the focal point. Indeed, to many, it was more than a symbol — it was the vital center of their religious faith, the place where God was present more than in any other location. One part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, was so sacred that only the High Priest could enter it once each year. No one else would even approach it, nor could anyone else see inside because it was separated by a heavy curtain.

The original Temple had been built by King Solomon in the 10th century B.C. and had become the center of the Hebrew nation's religious and political life. Even when the Temple lay in ruins for about 70 years in the 6th century B.C., after the Babylonian conquest of Judah (586 B.C.), the center of Hebrew worship remained 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.

The Temple underwent two major reconstructions. The first took place when the Jewish people returned from exile in 520 B.C., and the second was part of the enormous building projects carried out by King Herod, who ruled from 37 to 4 B.C., not 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, Solomon's Temple; the second Temple, rebuilt at the end of the 6th century; and the third, often called Herod's Temple, because of how he enlarged and embellished it.

The Temple was destroyed again by Roman legions in 70 A.D. and has never been rebuilt. Ironically, today in Jerusalem, the Muslim shrine known as the Dome of the Rock, or the Mosque of Omar, stands on the temple site. The western wall of the original Temple courtyard is considered the most sacred and holy place for people of the Jewish faith.

The importance of the Temple in the religious life of Jesus is evident in the New Testament. The birth of John the Baptist was announced in the Temple. The sacrificial offering made for every firstborn Jewish male child was made there by Mary and Joseph after the birth of Jesus.

The Temple was also the place where the future prominence of Jesus was announced by Simeon and Anna. At age 12, Jesus' religious significance was revealed in the Temple when his parents found him talking with the rabbis there. And now, in this story in the gospels, Jesus chased the merchants and money changers out of the Temple.

What was it about the activity of the merchants and money changers in the Temple that caused Jesus to become so upset?

These commercial activities in the Temple were nothing new; they had been a part of the Temple scene for years. So, there's more to this story than 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."

But it's even more than that. Jesus was against the corruption of religion — the use of one's religion for false purposes, or for one's own selfish purposes, in this case, the making of a profit by appealing to one's religious sentiments and beliefs. To do that is to corrupt what is holy.

Jesus wasn't against legitimate profit per se — but these vendors and money changers in the Temple court not only had a monopoly but were misrepresenting their goods.

Think of it this way: suppose we set up a Bible sales booth in this church and then required that all worshippers have Bibles for their personal use in the worship service. Further, we stipulated that the Bibles purchased here were uniquely blessed by God and were therefore more sacred than any other Bible. We might also suggest that if you bought one here, your life would be especially blessed by God.

That would be corrupting this building, the Holy Bible, and the Christian faith. It would be an attempt to take advantage of a human being's respect for what is holy.

Whenever a group or an individual tries to make a profit by promising or implying that God will bless the purchaser, that's corrupting what is holy. It's a temptation for all of us. We are tempted to believe in magic more than mystery. The appeal is being made all the time — pray this prayer, send this money, and God will bless you. To imply that God's blessing or approval

can be purchased so that someone or some institution makes a profit is a corruption of the holy.

Any attempt to use God or God's name to accomplish one's own selfish purpose is to corrupt the holy. Church leaders do it. Business people try it. Politicians do it. Governments attempt it. How many times have I heard it said, "God is a socialist," or "God is a capitalist," or "It is God's will that we pass this law."

In cleansing the Temple, Jesus was trying to call it back to its central purpose. It was to be first and foremost a place for worshippers to experience the presence and holiness of God, and it was not to be used for anyone's personal gain.

It's a good reminder for us in the church today. We need, from time to time, to consider whether or not the church of which we are a member is fulfilling its mission or has become something quite different. Has it become mostly a social club or something we use as a cover for our own agenda or a place where we try to avoid life's difficulties? If so, that is a corruption of the holy.

The second point that Jesus wanted to make regarding the Temple is that the building itself can become an idol and therefore a corruption of the holy. If this beautiful building we use for worship were completely destroyed, would this congregation and its mission cease to exist? Would it mean that God's presence is no longer active in our midst? Of course not. Our faith is not in this building but in God. The people are the church, not the building. The holy presence of God cannot be contained in any building, institution, or church denomination.

Jesus said just that. If the Temple in Jerusalem were to be destroyed again, which it was, God is still God. God is still to be worshipped. God's presence continues to be active among the people gathered in God's name, whether there's a building or not. At the same time, Jesus was not saying that religious symbols are unimportant. We set aside buildings and objects and call them holy to remind us that all of God's creation is holy.

In the creation stories in Genesis, we are told, "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed it was very good... so God blessed the 7th day and hallowed it." Today, we still set aside one day in seven as a holy day to remind us that all things God made are holy.

There is yet a third level of meaning to this story of driving the money changers out of the Temple. The Bible says that later, after Easter, the followers of Jesus, 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 that the strong faith of the Hebrew people could not be destroyed if the Temple were destroyed, so too, the faith of the followers of Jesus could not be destroyed with his crucifixion because with God, there is always new life.

And there is yet one more level of meaning in this story. In both the Old and New Testaments, we are reminded again and again that we are to think of our own bodies as "temples of God."

In the creation stories in Genesis, we are told that God made humankind in God's image and breathed into human beings the "breath of life." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for

“breath” and “spirit” have the same root. We are holy not only because God created us but also because God dwells in us.

Later in the New Testament, in his letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul picked up this same theme when he wrote, “Do you not know that you are God’s Temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? Your bodies are holy because you are created by God in God’s image and because God’s spirit dwells in them.” The early church used this analogy over and over again. Your body is God’s holy temple.

When we think of our bodies as holy temples of God, there are several implications we need to consider — since our bodies are holy, they are not to be abused, misused, or corrupted. This means that good health habits are a necessity for those who want to follow the way of Jesus. The use of drugs because of the way they abuse the human body is a corruption of the holy. Pornography is a misuse of the human body. Prostitution is a misuse of the human body. These are corruptions of the holy.

We can also make an idol of our body in the same way that the Temple in Jerusalem became an idol for some. There are those who worship the body too much. Some people, when they look at another human being, see only the body and not the total person, and they too quickly judge an individual only by physical appearance.

In this regard, I’ve been amused and fascinated this past week by all the discussion in the news on “cloning.” Let’s suppose that sometime in the future we will be able to make an identical copy of another human being. I’m assuming that to do that, the individual being cloned would begin as an embryo and would need to go through all the developmental stages of growing from a tiny infant to a mature adult human being. At every stage, that individual might appear to be an exact duplicate of another. But what cannot be “cloned” are all the life experiences, all the variables that affect each one of us from birth until the time we die. What cannot be cloned is how each one of us, with our free will, responds to the problems, difficulties, and joys we meet in life every day. In other words, as human beings created in the image of God, we are more than our DNA, more than the cells that constitute our physical bodies. We might be able to create “look-alikes,” but can we create “act-alikes?”

What does it mean to corrupt the holy? God has given us this beautiful creation and each other. Anytime we misuse or abuse any part of God’s creation, we are corrupting the holy. Amen.