Sunday, March 23, 2003
CORRUPTING THE HOLY
John 2:13-22

All four gospels in the New Testament — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — include the story of Jesus driving the money-changers and merchants out of the Temple complex in Jerusalem. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story is very brief, only a few verses. The Gospel of John has a longer version. There's one other difference: the Gospel of John places the story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, while the other three gospels place it near the end of his ministry. Among New Testament scholars, there are all sorts of theories about the different chronologies and why John's account is longer. I'm not going to deal with those in this sermon — that's more appropriate for a Bible study group.

The important questions for this sermon are: why was the story remembered so vividly? What are the main themes and teachings in the story? And how do they apply to you and me today?

One theme in the story is the anger of Jesus. For many Christians, anger is viewed as a bad thing — the very opposite of love, gentleness, forgiveness, and patience. Perhaps to some of you, an angry Jesus seems out of character. It's difficult to imagine him angry, especially if you've often depicted him as a gentle person, holding a little lamb in his arms, or praying with his hands folded in prayer. Isn't it true that you tend to imagine Jesus as an all-loving, all-compassionate, gentle Savior? If you're like me, you also want the world and your life to be safe from suffering, sorrow, tragedy, and rage.

It's easy to project your own desire for perfection onto the image of Jesus. If you are not loving enough, you can say, "He is." If you fail another person, or someone lets you down, you can still say, "Jesus would never let another person down, and he will not let me down."

But in this story, you see an irritated, angry Jesus, recorded in all four Gospels. The Christian faith has always declared that Jesus had two natures at the same time — that he was fully human and fully divine. In this story, his full humanity is revealed.

What made him so angry, and was he justified in his anger and actions? Here's the background. Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, along with countless others. When he entered the Temple complex, he saw merchants selling cattle, sheep, and doves for use in the sacrificial elements of Temple worship. This was not unusual. Many people had traveled a long distance and could not bring the necessary sacrificial items with them. He also saw the money-changers seated at their tables. When people came to the Temple to worship, most of them carried coins issued by the Roman Empire, which bore the image of Caesar. This was considered a desecration for use in the Temple offerings. The money-changers, therefore, had a good business. They also had a monopoly. Monopolies are always tempting and dangerous.

No doubt some of the money-changers were dishonest and charged higher exchange fees than normal. Jesus was also angry because of the extreme emphasis on the outward show of piety, which insisted on pure coinage and animals without blemish for sacrifice — always a problem in religious practice — a wrong emphasis on outward show rather than inward purity.

The point to remember is this: the fact that there were animals to be sold and money-changers in the Temple complex was not an offense in and of itself. They were fulfilling a necessary

service. Jesus was angry because the system was being abused for personal profit. He wasn't opposed to legitimate profit per se, but these vendors not only had a monopoly, they were also misrepresenting their goods.

Think of it this way: suppose a vendor set up a Bible sales booth in this church building and convinced the leaders to make it a requirement that all worshipers had to have Bibles for their personal use in the worship services, and only Bibles purchased in this building could be used. Then suppose it was further stipulated that the Bibles purchased here were uniquely blessed by God and were, therefore, more sacred than any other Bible. Suppose the vendor also promised you that if you bought one of these Bibles, your life would be especially blessed by God. This would be a corrupting of this building, a corrupting of the Bible, and a misrepresentation of God. Your anger and my anger at these practices would be understandable and justified. And the vendors shouldn't be surprised if we threw them out.

This story also helps you understand the anger of people who oppose any form of injustice. For example, it helps you understand some of the anger on the part of Black people and other minorities when they are mistreated, especially when religion has often been used to justify it.

I remember when Bishop Desmond Tutu was here in Lincoln a few years ago to deliver a lecture at the Lied Center. He had experienced the oppression of Black South Africans by the Afrikaners. He described injustice upon injustice, murders and beatings, and the deaths of innocent people and children. There was anger in his voice. There was also lament, but there was no hate, only an emphasis on righteousness and justice.

The anger that Bishop Tutu had, and that hopefully you have exhibited from time to time, is about how you handle your anger in the context of a loving, justice-seeking community. Jesus knew that anger for anger's sake or any kind of self-righteous anger is worthless and can even be harmful. I'm sure that you have seen and maybe even experienced hateful, self-righteous anger. Remember the hateful anger on the faces of people who tried to stop Black children from entering previously all-white schools after the courts had ordered integration. Remember the self-righteous anger of many people toward the leaders of the civil rights movement. Many of those leaders had turned their righteous anger into a nonviolent movement, and that made them targets — Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed, along with many others not so well known.

On the other hand, if anger motivates you to work for justice and compassion, it can be a valuable expression of your hope for healing.

Here in Lincoln, the righteous anger of women and men over the abuse of women by their husbands and live-in mates is the reason Friendship Home exists and needs our continued support. Any kind of abuse of another human being is a corruption of the holy — sexual abuse, financial abuse, mental abuse. Every time a child is physically or verbally abused by parents, it is an abuse of the holy.

So one theme in this story is an affirmation of righteous anger. When it is motivated by love, it can lead to change for the good.

A second theme in this story is that it warns you that there's always a temptation to corrupt the holy. Whenever a group or an individual tries to make a profit by implying or promising that God will especially bless the purchaser, that's corrupting the holy. The appeal is made all the time — pray this prayer, send this money, buy this product, attend a particular church, and in

return, God will bless you. To imply that God's approval or blessing can be bought or that only one person or institution makes a profit is a corruption of the holy.

There are countless ways that the holy is corrupted. Any attempt to use the power of God or God's name to accomplish one's own selfish purpose is to corrupt the holy. Church leaders do it. Businesspeople try it. Politicians do it. Governments attempt it. How many times have I heard it said, "God is a capitalist," or "God is a socialist," or "it is God's will that this law be passed?"

In chasing the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple courtyard, Jesus was trying to call the Temple back to its central purpose. It was to be, first and foremost, a place for worshipers 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 churches today.

In addition, Jesus wanted to remind his listeners that the Temple itself could 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 Spirit was 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 or institution or church denomination.

Even if the Temple were to be destroyed again, which it was later, God is still God. God's Spirit would continue to work in the world and would be present wherever two or three are gathered together to worship God. 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 good and holy.

In the creation story in Genesis, we are told, "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed it was very good... so God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it." One day in seven was set aside as a holy day to remind us that all days and all things God made are good and therefore holy.

There is a third theme in this story of Jesus driving the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple. John's gospel 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. Now they understood what he meant when he 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 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, nothing can destroy faith.

There is one more theme in this story. Throughout the Bible, you are reminded that you are to think of your own bodies as "temples of God." In the creation stories in Genesis, you are told, "God made humankind in God's image, and God breathed into human beings the breath of life." In the Hebrew language, the word for "breath" and "spirit" have the same root. When God breathed into you the breath of life, God was breathing into you God's Spirit. Your body is holy not only because God created you good, but it is a temple of God because God's Spirit dwells in you.

St. Paul emphasized 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 in God’s image and because God’s Holy Spirit dwells in you.

When you think of your body as a holy temple of God, it has tremendous implications. Because your body is holy, it is not to be abused, misused, or corrupted. This means that good health habits are to be followed for those who want to follow the way of Jesus.

The use of drugs that harm the body is to be avoided. They are a corruption of the holy. Pornography is a misuse of the human body. Prostitution is a corruption of the holy.

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

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