

If your Bible is like mine, over the top of the gospel reading for today there is a heading which says, "Jesus Cleanses the Temple." I get the image of Jesus out there with a scrub bucket and a rag washing the filth off the walls; as if Jesus hadn't kept his room clean so his father sent him out there to clean it up. Then he gets mad and loses his temple.

Of course this is silly, but it points to two ways this passage is wrongfully interpreted. (At least I think are wrongful interpretations.) First is the idea of cleansing the temple. That's wrong because there was nothing particularly dirty about it. I've come across many interpretations which suggest that the temple system had become corrupt - so corrupt that God had decided to reject it. The teaching then becomes that the Jews and their temple had it coming. They deserved it.

To be certain there was sure to be some corruption and unfairness among the merchants and money changers who set up within the temple grounds. But there's nothing to suggest this corruption was rampant. You'll remember that changing money and

buying animals for sacrifice was basically a necessity of the temple system.

Jews had only one temple - in Jerusalem. Other cities might have synagogues, but there was only one temple. The temple was the only appropriate site to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. All Jews, no matter where they lived, had to get back to the temple from time to time. Passover was the primary time this happened.

If you wanted to offer a sacrifice you had two choices. You could bring an animal from home or you could buy one once you got to the temple. Well, can you imagine traveling a thousand miles with a sheep? If there were airlines in those days I could see it now: Discount flights for Passover. One coach class ticket and one stall in the luggage compartment for your sheep. This is absurd. Most travelers would buy an animal for sacrifice once they reached Jerusalem.

Similarly with the money changers. You weren't allowed to use Roman coins in the temple. They had the graven image of the Emperor on them. But you couldn't use Jewish temple coins throughout the empire. Just like changing money when you travel

into another country, you'd change your money to temple currency when you got to Jerusalem.

All of this buying and exchanging did not take place in the inner courtyard of the temple itself. It took place in the outer courtyard where the general public was allowed. You'll remember the temple itself was little bigger than this sanctuary. The temple grounds though, covered several acres.

When Jesus says, "Take these things out of here. Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" he quoting Zechariah 14:21. That verse is a prophesy about a new age God will bring about for the entire world. Similarly, "Zeal for your house will consume me," is a quote from Psalm 69:9 and it refers to the rebuilding of the temple originally destroyed by the Babylonians.

Jesus' actions in the temple were not an angry act cleansing it of corruption. They were actions like the Old Testament prophets who often not only spoke words from God but added symbolic actions to them. To say Jesus was cleansing the temple isn't going far enough. Jesus was shutting the temple and the whole temple system down. God was bringing about a new age in the world. The old system of having to go to the temple

and offer a sacrifice for forgiveness of sins was ended. Now is a new age. Now is a new way of being in relationship with God. Now forgiveness came through Jesus. God's lavish grace is at the heart of this new age.

Here's another thought at how radical this new age - the age we live in - is. (We talked about this briefly at the church council planning retreat last Sunday.) We live in a pluralistic world. Many people don't believe in an ultimate truth anymore. There's little wonder why. Religion used to claim ultimate truth - only to be proved wrong by science. Science then claimed to hold the ultimate truth, but if you've spent much time at all looking at scientific studies you quite often find that the conclusions benefit the one funding the science - or it keeps changing. How many scientifically developed sets of dietary guidelines have there been - each one proving the previous one wrong?

Many people today have no problem saying, "What I believe to be true is true for me. What you believe to be true is true for you." I'll say this as a pastor, it's hard to sell Christian "truths" in an environment like that. Fortunately I, nor any of us, have to sell Christian "truths." We don't have to sell them because there aren't any!

We see an interesting thing happen when Pilate questions Jesus just before the crucifixion. Jesus says to Pilate, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate replies with an age old question, "What is truth?"

Jesus does not reply. Jesus does not reply because Pilate doesn't have a prayer of a chance of getting it. Jesus said to the disciples before his arrest, "I am the way and the truth and the life." (John 14:6) Pilate shouldn't have asked "What is truth?" He should have asked, "Who is truth?" Truth Himself was standing right in front of him.

As Christians we do not worship a place. Nor do we hold to a list of intellectual facts that we demand must be called "true" in order to have faith. As Christians we worship a person - the Truth, Jesus of Nazareth. If there is any fact to be believed in Christianity it is this: God loves you, and God loves you a lot. It is that love that shut down the temple and its entire belief system.

And speaking of love and the temple, let's conclude with some thoughts about our church building, particularly the sanctuary. What is this space? What makes it what it is?

There can be various answers, but let me give you mine. This space is a gift that we have built for ourselves and all the people who ever enter it. It is a space of grace.

The definition of grace is to have unmerited favor. We know that we have God's favor even though we do not earn it. This is space that we have set aside for grace. All the world may be a place of commerce: a place where you earn and merit things, a place where mistakes matter, a place where you have prestige, a place where you fit somewhere on the socio-economic ladder, a place where you have some measure of social marketability.

But not here. Here you earn nothing. Here there is no exchange of goods and services. Here you receive without merit and without price. Here you receive the body and blood of Christ and are nourished by God's word and baptized into God's kingdom. Here you have nothing, yet inherit everything. Here you are nobody, yet are the perfectly whole somebody God created you to be. That is God's grace to you in this new age. That is Truth. Amen.