

Messiah Moravian Church
March 3, 2024
Third Sunday in Lent, Year B
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John:13-22

A Temple Protest

Imagine you were a Jewish pilgrim in the year 33 C.E. who has traveled from your hometown or nearby village to Jerusalem to take part in the Passover festival.

When you arrive at the Temple mount, you are overwhelmed by the size of the courtyards and the massive Temple. Known as the Second Temple, Herod The Great began construction on it in 20 B.C.E. and is still in a state of continuous construction, covering an astonishing 37 acres. It takes up one-sixth of the space in the city of Jerusalem.

You find a busy, loud, bustling scene. You know that a requirement for the observance of Passover is to enter the Temple to make a sacrificial animal offering and to pay the Temple tax. The outermost courtyard is the Courtyard of the Gentiles. It is filled with vendors selling the sheep, cattle, and doves for sacrificial offerings.

Moneychangers are there also to convert the various currencies from the far corners of the Roman Empire into the Tyrian Shekel, the only coin you may use to pay the Temple tax.

Because it's Passover, the whole complex is packed with many happy, boisterous Jews celebrating their escape from Egyptian bondage 1300 year ago while, ironically, enduring the current brutal Roman occupation.

The Temple is the most important religious site in Judaism as well as a very popular tourist attraction. Along with Jewish pilgrims and the many priests who served in the Temple to facilitate the sacrificial offerings, Gentiles are there too. Some come out of curiosity and others come to offer their own prayers to the Jewish God. But the Gentiles are limited to the outermost courtyard. You notice Roman guards posted all around for crowd control, especially at Passover, and you can sense the tension their presence creates.

A small commotion way over in a far corner catches your eye, where a few animals are shuffling around and several dealers are yelling at someone about something. You are too far away to make out the words.

In the huge, crowded courtyard most people simply ignore the incident. But you do notice that Temple officials and Temple guards hurry quickly toward the commotion. They know that any disturbance, no matter how small, will give the Roman soldiers an excuse to swarm like hornets into the crowd to brutally squash anything even remotely suggesting a disturbance or, even worse, an uprising.

Later, you hear that itinerant rabbi Jesus had staged a protest like one of the prophets of old.

You overhear a few of the other pilgrims whisper that such behavior could get a man killed. You wonder, why would he do it?

Let's come back to the 21st century as the *Gentiles* we are. So why did Jesus do it?

Did he just lose his temper? Probably not. Was he against animal sacrifice? There's no clear evidence for that. Was it because the vendors were price gouging? Because the moneychangers were extorting the pilgrims by offering lousy exchange rates so they could make greater profits? Perhaps. That easily could have happened because it's human nature for a few people to take advantage of others. But there's no clear evidence that it was a widespread problem.

Though we can't fully read Jesus's reasoning for his demonstration, probably the best answer is that it was an act of prophetic teaching and witness. Prophets create scenes sometimes in order to make a point, like Hosea marrying a prostitute or Jeremiah wearing an oxen yoke or Isaiah walking around naked for three years.

We don't understand what's going on in this passage unless we understand the centrality of the Temple to Judaism and Jewish identity. As *Gentiles* we would not be a part of that devotion.

At the Temple we would be allowed only into the Courtyard of the *Gentiles*, the largest and outermost courtyard of the four Temple courtyards. It's really outside the Temple building area *per se*, but it's still part of the Temple complex, and we would be welcomed there. We will be allowed to get close to the Temple proper, but we're not allowed inside. We're not included.

If you must have an unblemished animal for sacrifice, you need to buy it somewhere. So out of necessity and for convenience, it's really not surprising that vendors came as close

as possible to the Temple, right into the quarter of the *Gentiles*, to make those necessary sales possible. And the moneychangers were also there to provide the necessary acceptable coins. These are not illicit businesses. So what's the problem?

The problem is that they had filled the space reserved for the *Gentiles*. Jesus will elsewhere say, "My Father's house is to be a house of prayer." This is where the *Gentiles* should be allowed to enter and to pray. What would it mean that a *Gentile* showed up in the Courtyard of the *Gentiles* at the Jerusalem Temple to pray? It would mean that *Gentile* knows that the God of Israel is God. And so this is a *Gentile* getting as close as a *Gentile* can get to the worship of the One true and living God of **all** people.

In his demonstration Jesus declares his radical, unheard-of inclusiveness of all people in his father's kingdom—prostitutes, the poor, tax collectors, women, the sick, rebellious sons--even *Gentiles*, outsiders like us. Jesus's main concern was not that people were selling and exchanging these worship items. It had been going on for as long as anyone could remember. But what had happened is that it had moved inside of the Temple proper. By moving inside, business had displaced *Gentiles* worshippers with trade in their courtyard. It was no longer a house of prayer for *Gentiles*.

The Courtyard of the *Gentiles* is a representation of the promise that God gave to Abraham in

Genesis 28:18: "And you, and in your seed, all the nations of the earth will be blessed." So the Courtyard of the *Gentiles* was a sign that God has a saving purpose that is beyond Israel and even beyond what takes place inside the Temple. Jesus does not want that promise forgotten by Temple officials who have permitted commercialism to creep into his Father's house. With his protest, Jesus reasserts a founding purpose of the Temple and its place in his Father's kingdom on earth for all people

We are all included in God's house. So are the Samaritans, the tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, immigrants, Palestinians, Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, Hispanics, African Americans, Democrats, Republicans—all of us, no exceptions. By his life and by his death, Jesus accomplished our full atonement and granted us admission into the temple, not with an animal sacrifice in that massive Jerusalem structure built of stone, but in and through the temple of his body on the cross and his new life from the grave.