

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 15, 2009

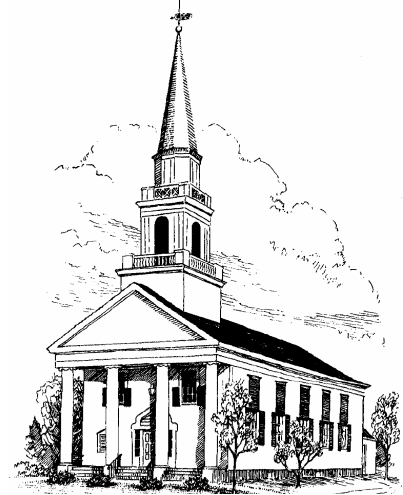
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Beyond Jerusalem”

Scriptures:

Exodus 20:1-17

John 2:13-22



You can only tolerate it so long. I watched my mother wash her hands of it and close my bedroom door. I tried it with my children, too. Perhaps you have, as well. “It’s your room,” she would say. “If you want to live in this mess, go right ahead. But I’m closing your door so *I* don’t have to look at it.” Of our four children, three of them were of the same ilk as I. And I tried my mother’s tact. “It’s your room,” I would say. “If you can tolerate playing, studying, sleeping in this pigsty, it’s not my business.” And I would close the door. But, eventually, just as my mother did, I could stand it no longer and would erupt a few days later with something like, “You are going **NOWHERE**, young man (or young lady, as the case may be), until that room is clean!”

My Dad was the one with the long fuse. (Probably because he wasn’t home with us all day!) A gentle and patient teacher, I learned many things from him, both at the kitchen table and out in the yard. He taught me how to add long columns of figures in my head. He taught me how to throw a baseball—“not like a girl.” There were even a few poker lessons thrown in. Seldom did he erupt, but when he did, you knew this was serious.

The passage we heard this morning has been used and interpreted in a variety of ways over the centuries. The one way it has been used which I just cannot subscribe to is as a justification for violence. Certainly, the rest of Jesus’ words and actions in the gospel override this one episode to point us to the way of non-violence, imitated and encouraged by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and many more unsung like them. But it certainly does point to the anger we all feel at certain times; and, just as the fully human nature of Jesus became exasperated with the apostles and was overcome with fear and anxiety in the Garden before his death, this passage reveals that he became angry, too.

What isn’t as clear, and what has also been debated is whether Jesus exhibited in the Temple a short fuse or a long one. The synoptic gospels, the name we use for the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke taken together, similar in structure and story, place this eruption by Jesus in the temple towards the end of his public ministry, in fact, *after* the palm-leaf parade entry into Jerusalem. But in the gospel of John, which we read this morning, the author places this episode right at the *beginning* of Jesus’ ministry, with only the miracle at the wedding at Cana preceding it. You may remember at the wedding when his mother told him they were out

of wine, he first responded with, “my hour has not come”—so this temple table turnover immediately following is right at the beginning of his ministry in John’s gospel.

So the next logical question may be “Why?”. In the other gospels, we might be able to point to the gentle, patient, teacher Jesus and the narratives building and building with multiple encounters with Jewish authorities, until finally “long-fuse” Jesus lets them have it. Another interpretation has been, not only for this gospel of John but also for the others, that Jesus was purposely provoking, intentionally giving the Jewish authorities a concrete reason to arrest him in one case and, in the other, at least to sit up and take immediate notice of this new prophet.

Whether this episode occurred at the beginning, at the end or in the middle of Jesus’ ministry is not as important, however, as what message his words and actions sent to the temple authorities and continues to send to us today. One message may be how we run our churches. This passage is often used for justification for no bingo, no raffles, no money-changing in the church. It’s helpful to understand what those money-changers were doing. The animals outside were being sold for burnt-offering sacrifice in the Temple. The currency the people used for purchasing the doves and sheep and cattle was Roman currency and had to be exchanged for the official currency accepted by the Temple for the temple tax—the half-shekel of the region of Tyre. As you can well imagine then, there was all kinds of room here for profit-making and corruption. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” One scholar notes that Jesus’ indignation was not toward those engaged in worship, but toward those who were detracting from it. His public demonstration was against the materialism that had become part of Temple worship services.

So one direction we could take today is to do some self-examination around whether, and, if so, how materialism may be detracting from our worship. But, when questioned by the Jews, Jesus responds “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” And we are told that he was speaking of the temple of his body. And just two chapters later, Jesus meets the Samaritan woman, a non-Jew, at the well, who says to him, “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

And he replies to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

This is bigger than buildings. This is bigger than physical spaces which we humans delineate as appropriate for one thing and inappropriate for another. This is about all of our space being sacred. God is spirit and God is everywhere, including within. We may begin with what the apostle Paul wrote: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

Especially during this season of Lent, but throughout all our days, we are called to inventory our individual personal temples. Thought, word and deed. Are we a place of corruption? Taking profit at the expense of others? Or are we keeping this a sacred space where

God's spirit may dwell without detraction?

And what of our bricks and mortar? Have we become more concerned with the material conditions of the spaces in our lives than with inviting God's spirit in to take up welcome and comfortable residence there? Not just in our homes and workspace, but right here in this temple? Is making this our Father's house our highest priority? Is this a place where we can worship God in spirit and truth?

Joseph Small, the Director of the Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, writes: "The specificity of Jesus' prophetic act in cleansing the temple also raises the question of 'the cleansing of the church.' The reform of the church is not simply a cherished sixteenth-century memory, but neither is it a contemporary stream of managerial fixes to organizational woes or easy acquiescence to cultural trends." And he goes on to remind us that the reformer and renewer is God and that reform of the church must always be in harmony with and in conformity to Christ.

And here's where we find the hope and the direction to make sure our spaces and our places are clean, are sacred, are inviting to God's spirit. Both within and without. Both at home and at work and in our media and in our commerce, Wall Street and Main Street, business zones and adult zones, and in our church. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Through his death and his resurrection, we know that we can tear down those years-old faulty construction projects—the ones housing old destructive personal habits, or the material ones distracting us from our true spirit, or the ones which keep our eyes blind to the corruption in our institutions, or the ones which destroy the largest temple God gave us, this planet earth. We can stop construction, tear them down and clean up the sites upon which they have stood with the help and the renewing power of Jesus Christ. The conqueror of ultimate death can certainly lead us in conquering the little deaths which have detracted from our truly worshiping the God of spirit and truth everywhere.

We read that after he was raised from the dead, the apostles remembered this episode and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. Long after my parents' deaths, I remember the short-fused and the long-fused eruptions about the temple of my bedroom and, years later, I believe and understand what they saw—lack of appreciation, disrespect, laziness, barriers to ordered and intentional living. They could tolerate it no longer. Neither could Jesus. Neither should we. Amen.

