
The Church Has Problems! The Church Wants Your Problems!

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
The Third Sunday in Lent – Year B**

Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and turned over their tables. ... "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" –John 2:14-16

Maybe it surprises us that Jesus got angry a few times in his life. Events like this familiar story remind us that Jesus was not just a gentle, soft-hearted, new-age spiritual guru – just another feel-good self-help writer.

There are other stories in the New Testament where Jesus is even more specifically angry. He calls the Pharisees some God-awful names: "white-washed tombs," "den of snakes." "Woe to you," he calls out.

Today's gospel reminds us that God does get angry. What is it that made Jesus angry? What makes God angry? In short, it is the dis-honoring, the dis-respecting of God's people that makes God angry.

Imagine, with me, the background of today's story: the cleansing of the temple. Two thousand years ago, a child of God was on pilgrimage. He was going up to the great temple of Jerusalem, to make an offering. That trip was the proper pilgrimage for every faithful Jew of the time; it was at the temple where the most effective offerings were made. The people of God were made right with God.

The common folk, the common pilgrims, would try to carry with them the animal they intended to offer. Maybe it was a sheep, or a turtle dove. Often, however, they would just carry the money, so that they could buy the right offering at the temple itself.

In fact, the right offering was critical. A proper sacrifice consisted of a proper animal. And the temple authorities included inspectors who would examine your animal. A dove had to be perfect. A lamb had to be unblemished, as scripture dictated.

And here is what the pilgrim would often hear at the temple: "Well, pilgrim, it looks like your lamb, your turtle dove, is not quite right. Uh, you have a problem. There's a slight blemish. But no matter. We have some already inspected and authorized animals right here –whatever you want—cattle, sheep, doves."

"However, if you want to buy one of them, you have to use our currency. You have to use temple money." Yes, because the temple accepted only temple money, not the blemished currency of the Roman government.

"You don't have the right currency? You don't have the right denomination? Well, it so happens we have some moneychangers right here. They can help you buy, help you trade; they can exchange your money."

This was what the child of God encountered in the Jerusalem temple two thousand years ago. This was what Jesus saw in the temple two thousand years ago.

It was not a simple "marketplace" that Jesus encountered. I believe Jesus likes regular and fair marketplaces! I believe Jesus loves our Cathedral Farmers Market which resumed its season yesterday. Our Farmers Market is a place of community and fair commerce, a place for the common good. We appreciate, and pay for, healthy foods and fine items that are sold there. It is beneficial to the common good.

No, Jesus was angry about something else. It was the purity system he was angry about. It was the transactional system, by which the strict temple authorities required such perfection and purity from the common pilgrim that they made money on the exchange of animals and currency.

Jesus could not tolerate it. "Stop making my Father's house so transactional. Stop makin people pay for forgiveness!" he exclaimed. This was what Jesus overturned and drove out of God's holy place. We might also translate these words of Jesus as "Stop making forgiveness and grace so transactional!" Jesus was against the authorities who prohibited the simple offerings of the common faithful people.

Now, let's skip to today. A lot of people look at the church today, and they tell me they see problems. And, do you know what? I agree with them!

"Yes, the church has problems," I say. Then I ask, "Do you know why the church has problems?" I answer, "Because we bring them here!" We're the ones who bring problems here. In fact, the church is supposed to have problems! The church is supposed to be the place where people are free to bring their problems.

We gather all sorts of imperfection and incompleteness here. We gather blemishes here. We even gather sin. We gather problems just like those that the common pilgrim brought to the Jerusalem temple years ago. The church (this Cathedral!) is supposed to have problems.

The Church not only has problems. The Church wants those problems!

"Destroy this temple in three days," said Jesus, "and I will raise it back up!" Destroy the sham, Jesus said. Destroy the walls that try to keep out imperfection and sin. Destroy the walls of self-righteousness and pride.

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it back up, he said. He was speaking of the temple of his body, the Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ comes to accept our sin and imperfection. When the Christian church is healthy, the Body of Christ takes in sin and imperfection and blemish all the time. We have problems, because the Body of Christ is a house of prayer for all people. We take in offerings and problems, and we bless them. And when we bless them, they are transubstantiated; they are changed. They are graced.

One of the most important things we Christians do is accept the offerings of others. It may be posting the crude crayon picture from our child on the refrigerator door. It may be listening to a bit of bad poetry from our spouse. It may be giving the dirty stranger a place at our church table. The Christian accepts the problems of others.

The miracle of God is that there is no offering that God cannot accept. There is no offering that God cannot use. Sure, God uses the glorious and glittering offerings. But God also uses the imperfect and blemished offerings. You do not have to be perfect to come to church!

What do you have to offer God today? Praise God if what you offer is pure and unblemished. That is wonderful. But praise God, too, if all you can offer is something blemished and impure, something imperfect. Maybe all you have to offer God today is your incomplete-ness, your loneliness, your somber sadness, your grief, your despair, even your anger.

The Body of Christ can handle those offerings. We don't need moneychangers and traders. The Body of Christ can handle whatever we give, and whoever we are. Because we are a body of grace and forgiveness. Destroy the walls that keep out blemishes, turn over the tables of those who keep out the pilgrim and the child of God. Drive out the symbols of self-righteousness, death, and emptiness.

And God will raise up, in us, a new body of life. God will raise up the Body of Christ, with resurrection power.

AMEN.

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