

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 2, 2025

Church Economics

John 2:13-22

Today's text takes us from the countryside to the big city. Last Sunday, we saw Jesus at a rural reception hall, joining in a wedding celebration, turning water into wine. Today we see him in the Jerusalem temple, bringing daily operations in God's house to a halt. At the marriage in Cana, Jesus' presence was more low profile. But in the temple, there's no missing him. He makes his presence known by creating a public disruption.

Our Lord certainly picked a prime location to make a statement. The temple was always a busy place, especially during Passover. Pilgrims were flowing into the city to participate in the annual remembrance of the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt, the most important event in Jewish history. There were temple taxes to pay and sacrifices to be made. If you didn't have the right currency, you needed a moneychanger to convert your denarii into half-shekels so you could pay your tax. If you had traveled a long distance, making it unrealistic or downright impossible to transport sacrificial animals with you, you needed a merchant who could sell you a sheep or a dove, so you could participate in the required rituals. So you can understand why the temple was bustling with people and animals and transactions. On the surface, you would think that all this activity is a sign that religious life is booming, and that worshipers take their obligations seriously.

But instead of praising those gathered in God's house, Jesus goes into a rage. He grabs some ropes and improvises a whip that he uses to clear out the animals. He flips over the moneychangers' tables. He grabs their cash boxes and dumps their coins onto the floor. He tells the merchants to take their cages of doves and beat it. "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (v. 16, NRSVUE). The term can also be rendered as "emporium," a place of buying and selling. Eugene Peterson stretches it even further with "Stop turning my Father's house into a shopping mall!"

Just as a lighthearted aside, it makes me wonder about what might happen if Jesus showed up at our church yard sale, or maybe our fall festival. After all, those folding tables are pretty easy to flip over. I hope he wouldn't disrupt the transactions at our baked goods sale. Plus, the last time we had hotdogs and popcorn, we didn't even charge for them. Or what about that live turkey that everyone, especially the children, enjoyed at our harvest event? I hope Jesus wouldn't tell that lady to take her animals and hit the road. Surely our Lord would understand that these events are intended to strengthen our engagement with the community and to raise funds for use in our congregation's outreach for the kingdom. It's not as if we're trying to operate the Grace Baptist Emporium.

At the same time, we have to remember that the presence of Jesus is often a disruptive presence. Yes, we look to him and focus on him as the one who gives stability, encouragement, and reassurance to our lives, individually and together. But his work among us, especially in our life as a congregation, is frequently a work of disturbing us and challenging us, especially when we become too settled and embedded in patterns and rules and practices that make us resistant to his saving, life-giving power at work among us. Like

those at the temple who resisted the presence and authority of Jesus, we too can get so comfortable and secure with the status quo that we take our religious institutions, systems, and structures, and equate them with the presence of God, when in fact Jesus himself is the most holy place.

This is what generates the tension and conflict in today's text. When Jesus starts cracking his whip in the temple, he's creating chaos in what his fellow Jews regarded as the most important place on earth. The temple was the place where heaven and earth met, where God's space and human space were one. This was where the creator God had chosen to take up residence among his people. And suddenly, here's Jesus, stirring up trouble and claiming that he himself is the focal point of God's presence. No wonder they asked him to give them a sign to confirm that he had this kind of authority.

Jesus responds by challenging the authority of the temple itself in a way that quite literally shakes its foundations. "Destroy this sanctuary," says Jesus (v. 19). "Knock it all down, take it apart, and in three days I'll raise this house of worship again." His brothers and sisters in the faith are understandably confused and upset. "This sanctuary has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?!" That's when John, as he sometimes does, leans in to explain what Jesus is talking about. "He's referring to the temple of his body." So Jesus' body itself is the sanctuary of God's presence. He himself is the site of God's glory. But from where we sit now, on this side of the resurrection, where is Jesus? Well, he's anywhere he wants to be. He's everywhere. And he's especially present in the community of his people. In other words, Jesus is in church, not as the building, but as the assembly of his followers.

But as a gathering of his people, we still have our buildings, our structures, our organization, our practices. And I would add, our economics. Church economics. When I say church economics, I mean the ways that we manage, use, and share the resources that God has entrusted to us in the life of our congregation, especially financial and material resources. These kinds of things have always been part of the life of God's people, including those who had come to the temple in Jerusalem.

When Jesus drove the animals, merchants, and moneychangers out of God's house, he wasn't declaring that this sacred space is devoted solely to spiritual matters, as if "spiritual" meant just abstract, non-material realities. No, for God's people, both then and now, material and financial matters are deeply spiritual matters. Our personal and corporate economics fall under the authority of the Lord just as much as other areas of life, such as our marriages and families, our sexuality, our education, our jobs, our relationships, and so on. No part of life falls outside the sovereign will and purpose of God.

This reality is reflected here in our own church, as we practice the economics of God's kingdom, especially through our stewardship of financial and material resources. We've been entrusted with resources that belong first and foremost to God. His gifts flow into our lives, and into our church, not primarily for our own personal benefit and glory, but for God's kingdom and God's glory.

One of the primary ways we practice the economics of God's reign is through our giving. Every Sunday, we come into the presence of God, offering him our praises, our songs of thanks, our prayers, and our attentiveness to his word. But our worship would fall far short of God's purposes if it didn't also include the offering of our financial and material resources. When we pass the plate, we're acknowledging God's ownership. We're declaring that we, and all that we have, belong to the Lord. We're proclaiming that the coming of his kingdom

and the doing of his will, on earth as it is in heaven, is inseparable from what we do with the money and the goods that have been placed in our hands, for the good of others.

True, a lot of what you give stays here, to help provide for and sustain the daily work and ministry of our church. But through items in our budget, special offerings for national and international missions, our benevolence collection, and occasional love offerings, much of what you give goes out beyond ourselves and into the lives of others who, like us, need the good news of God's kingdom. In other words, our mission includes economics. And when we cultivate an atmosphere of generosity and sacrifice here in our church, we're acknowledging that our lives are intertwined with one another, and others, in a web of relationships that includes the sharing and distribution of money.

There's a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania who has spent years trying to quantify the economic value that a congregation adds to its community. His calculations take into account a whole range of services and activities that go on in a church, especially large urban congregations.¹ But many of the categories he uses could also apply to a small church like ours. Things like the number of hours that many of you volunteer here at the church. The payments that are made to local companies in order to do building repairs and enhancements. The economic impact of helping people get off drugs or alcohol. The money that church members spend at local businesses. The jobs that were created and incomes that were generated when we had a day care ministry in our church. The times that money from the church budget is spent in ways that stimulate the local economy. The ways that our church, or partnering agencies, provide financial and material assistance to individuals and families in need. So as you give to God through the life of our church, remember that economics within our church is intertwined with economic conditions beyond our church, in ways we often don't realize or imagine.

Belden Lane tells this Jewish legend:

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill, each night dividing the grain they had ground together during the day. One brother lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family.

Now, the single brother thought to himself one day, "It isn't fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed." So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary to see that he was never without.

But the married brother said to himself one day, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he's old?" So every night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning.

Then one night they met each other halfway between their two houses. They suddenly realized what had been happening and embraced each other in love. The legend is that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, "This is a holy place, a place of love, and here it is that my temple shall be built." So it was. The First Temple is said to have been constructed on that very site.²

In today's text, though Jesus certainly disrupts the operations of the temple, he still calls it "my Father's house," and he challenges the way it has been turned into a marketplace, a place where profit has become the primary value, rather than the holy love of God. Remember that the temple was meant to be a place of sacrifice, where the sins of the people could be atoned for and they could be one with God. Eventually, the temple would end up destroyed, by outside forces. But Jesus himself was raised up. He himself became

the temple, having atoned for human sin, reconciling us to God and to one another. Jesus himself is where we meet God, and we his church are to be a dwelling place for his presence, a residence for the glory of God. And as Jesus dwells in us, his self-giving, self-sacrificing love gets embodied in many ways, especially in how we practice generous, self-emptying church economics, receiving and sharing God's gifts with one another and with the world.

¹ "What a Church Does, in Dollars and Cents." Christianity Today. January/February 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2020/01/sociologist-cnaan-church-economic-value-halo-effect/> (January 30, 2025).

² Belden Lane, "Rabbinical Stories." *Christian Century* Vol. 98, No. 41 (December 16, 1981) n.p.