

## **“March Madness”**

### **John 2:13-22**

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most bizarre things Jesus ever did. So shocking was it that all four gospel writers included it in their account of Jesus' life and ministry.

John mentions it near the beginning of his book to introduce his readers to Jesus and set the tone for the narrative to follow. The other three writers place it near the end of his public ministry as a way of revealing the religious leaders' contempt for Jesus and the final reason for crucifying him.

By the way, if you are looking for the Jesus Charles Wesley described in the hymn, “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild,” you won't find him here. To the contrary, you will encounter an angry and assertive Jesus who incensed the religious leaders when he went on a rampage, running the people exchanging money and selling animals out of the Temple. Listen as I describe the details.

Like thousands of other devout Jews, Jesus and his disciples made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe Passover. This annual spring festival celebrated the release of their ancestors from generations of bondage under the heavy hand of Pharaoh.

Upon entering the Temple, Jesus was appalled at what he saw. Instead of being an inclusive place of worship where people could pray as they explored the mysteries of life and faith, Jesus found a noisy barnyard filled with animals of all shapes and sizes being sold for exorbitant prices.

Why were these animals being sold in the Temple? Worshipers were required to give the priest an animal to be sacrificed as atonement for their sins. Many brought an animal from home but upon arriving at the Temple, they were informed their animal did not qualify for that offering.

Inspectors seemed to find blemishes on all the animals brought from home which meant worshipers had no choice but to purchase an animal in the Temple which was being sold for much more than it was worth. When Jesus realized the religious leaders were gouging the people who had traveled great distances to attend Passover in order to line their own pockets, he became incensed.

This was not all Jesus saw as he made his way through the Temple that day. Next to the people selling these overpriced animals were the moneychangers.

While at the Temple, everyone had to pay Temple taxes. These taxes, however, could only be paid with coins made of pure silver that had no human image on them.

This meant worshipers had to exchange their Roman coins which had Caesar's image on them for kosher ones. Once again, the excited pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover were being fleeced by the very people they were called to serve.

It did not take Jesus long to realize the Temple authorities were religious racketeers sucking the last coins out of the pockets of those who could least afford it. It was obvious to him that compassion, community and God had been pushed out of the Temple by greed and corruption. This was why Jesus took matters into his own hands that day by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and running them, along with the animals and their handlers, out of the Temple.

**How do you think the religious leaders reacted to what Jesus did?** I think you know. They were furious and began looking for ways to arrest and kill Jesus.

I am not surprised. When you mess with people's pocketbooks, you discover a side of them you never knew. Disagreements over money can bring the worst out in people, as it did with Annas, the former High Priest who was still calling the shots and controlling this thriving business.

In his book, Synopsis of the Four Gospels, Kurt Aland reveals that Annas and his family were in charge of what we would refer to as a multimillion dollar enterprise. The money they made from selling animals and exchanging currency in the Temple made them wealthy and powerful, and anyone who exposed their sinister ways had to go.

This was why, immediately after Jesus' arrest, he was taken directly to Annas (John 18:12-13). Annas would see to it Jesus paid dearly for threatening their livelihood, just as previous prophets discovered when they challenged the status quo.

**Why do you think Jesus cleansed the Temple that day?** He had to know Annas would be angry and seek revenge.

Yes, Jesus knew how risky this act of defiance would be, but this did not deter him. He could not ignore the plight of those who were being exploited by, of all people, the religious leaders they were taught to respect and trust.

Jesus was sent by God for such a time as this. When he accepted this mission to be an advocate for the poor and powerless, he had to speak truth to power on their behalf.

Jesus felt compelled to make hope visible by standing with those who were being exploited. His prophetic voice had to be heard in word and deed.

Risky? Sure it was, but being faithful to God's call upon his life was more important to Jesus than self-preservation. He would rather die than let God down or disappoint those he came to serve.

**Do you feel the same way?** What does faithfulness to God look like in our culture? What does God expect of us today? Let the same prophet who guided Jesus direct our paths.

"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8).

God expects us to live justly every day and to pursue justice everywhere. In all our dealings, we are to be honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable and fair.

We are to treat everyone the way we want to be treated, with dignity and respect. When we say something, mean it. When we make a promise, keep it. When we agree to do something, follow through.

At the same time, we are to work hard to see that all people are treated fairly and take up their cause when they are not. If someone is being bullied or exploited, we need to stand with them and confront their oppressors. We are to bring the full weight of our influence upon those who are exploiting others even if it costs us something to speak up.

We are to listen to pleas for help that others ignore and respond to their plight with compassion and grace. Calling to the front of the line the forgotten and forsaken is our mission. If we don't do this, who will?

In my opinion, this is what it means to walk humbly with God. Decisions are made which reflect the heart and nature of God, not our selfish desires. We refuse to build our own kingdom instead of advancing God's Kingdom.

Isn't this what Jesus prayed for and modeled? **How can we be his disciple and do any less? How can we be Jesus' church unless we adopt his mission and work together to continue the work he began?**

The church should be one place where people find acceptance, unconditional love, forgiveness, community, encouragement and hope.

The church needs to be a place where people connect with the Holy and find guidance for their journey.

The church needs to be a safe place where people can ask questions as they explore the mysteries of life and faith.

The church needs to be a place of healing where the wounded can renew their strength.

The church needs to a place where believers are empowered to take this ethic of love into the marketplace.

This was what the pilgrims who descended upon Jerusalem during Passover came in search of but did not find. This was what Jesus went hoping to find in the Temple that day but did not.

**I wonder if people find it here.**

**I wonder what Jesus thinks.**