

John 2:13-25

There is a long and honorable tradition in the Hebrew Bible of critiquing forms of worship and misuse of the Temple. The prophet Amos, of course, heard God saying, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your sons; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” His point is that artistic and beautifully executed worship is empty if it doesn’t come from people who truly care about justice and look out actively for the poor and vulnerable. Worshipers who don’t care about the values in the commandments clearly don’t know or care about the God they claim to worship.

Nehemiah, who was instrumental in the rebuilding of the Temple after the Babylonian Exile, actually did a cleansing of the Temple 500 years before Jesus. Nehemiah 13 recalls a situation in which a priest had cleared out a storage room in the newly rebuilt Temple so a relative could live there. When Nehemiah heard it, he says, “I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah (the relative) out of the room. They I gave orders and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense” (vss. 8-9).

So critiques of formal worship are deeply Jewish, as is vigilance about the potential for corrupting the Temple itself as a physical space. Although John refers to “the Jews” challenging Jesus, experts think it’s more accurate to say “the Judeans,” meaning the people from the area around Jerusalem as opposed to Galileans. I think it’s John’s version of “coastal elites.”

It’s Passover, and Jesus like any pious Jew goes to Jerusalem and to the Temple as part of his observance. Something about the moneychangers there offends him, and John doesn’t

bother to tell us what that is. My working theory has always been that Jesus is offended by the presence of Roman coins in the Temple, because they bear an image of the emperor who claimed to be divine, so it's blasphemous—it's bringing a graven image of a false god into the real God's sacred space. I still like that theory, but as many commentators point out, it's not a great fit for John's version of the story. My theory would suggest a more Nehemiah-like Jesus who wants to clean things up and get back to proper use of the Temple. But John has Jesus actually predicting the destruction of the Temple and sort of moving the conversation along to an issue of where God is more present, in this building or in Jesus himself. So we're just not entirely clear about what it is about the Temple that offends Jesus in this story. However, I'll throw out just one more tantalizing clue.

The prophet Zechariah, who also worked around the time of the building of the Second Temple, begins his prophecy by saying that the day of the Lord is coming. He ends by saying, "And there shall no longer be *traders* in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day." Zechariah may not be talking about the messianic age coming, and his traders in the house of the Lord are Canaanites, not people facilitating sacrifice for travelers, but you can see how a first-century Jew or Jewish Christian would have read Zechariah: Jesus came and inaugurated the messianic age, and he fulfilled Zechariah's prophecy by throwing out the moneychangers.

Notice, though, that John has placed this story early in his narrative. In the synoptic gospels it comes at the end, and it's the precipitating factor for Jesus' arrest and execution. In John it's another piece of the puzzle about who Jesus is. They point at the heart of what he is about. The Judeans want to know by what authority he's driven out the animals and upset the tables, and Jesus answers that they'll see by what authority he acts when the temple is

destroyed and he raises it up. Of course they have no clue that he means that his body is the Temple, because why would they? It only makes sense to his disciples after his resurrection, but John helpfully explains it to us so we don't have to wait. God is present through Jesus; he's the Temple, and *he* will be raised up in three days.

The Temple functions as the locus of God, the place to go to encounter the sacred. John wants us to understand that Jesus is now the locus of God's presence. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, as we've seen, there was an understanding that as long as you need an apparatus to connect with God, it will be subject to human error. Priests will take over rooms in the temple for their relatives. People will use the processes of worship for self-aggrandizement rather than for spiritual formation. Jesus is saying now that the religious apparatus is superfluous, and that access to God through him is relational, enfleshed, personal, hands-on.

This contrast seems glib to me. The Temple, and every religious institution, is animated by flesh and blood people. If I were to try to transfer this lesson to our congregation, I'd have to say something like, Crossroads the church is not the portal to an experience of the sacred; Christ in our midst is that portal. And you'd all go, Yes, we learned as children that the church is not a building, it's a people. I mean, what's the difference between Crossroads the church and Crossroads the human beings in whom Christ lives and moves and has his being? There isn't one, and both are human and flawed.

But if John is establishing at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus is the embodied presence of God, the way he ends his story of Jesus' public life fills out what that means. At the end, the night before his death, Jesus kneels at the feet of his disciples and washes their dirty feet. Then he tells them that they must love each other as he has loved them: they must love in

a hands-on way, a dirty-hands way, a very practical way. Jesus is the embodied presence of God, and that looks like someone who cares tenderly for others.

The epilogue scene in the musical “Les Miserables” has a powerful line, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” Les Mis is set against the backdrop of the Paris Uprising of 1832. You’ll recall, if you’ve seen it or read the book, that there’s a good deal of human misery in it, from the poverty of a single mother, Fantine, to the neglect of her orphaned daughter Cosette, to the loneliness of the hero Jean Valjean, who starts life as a thief and remakes himself as a factory owner, only to have to take responsibility for his earlier crimes in order to prevent an innocent man from being imprisoned.

Jean Valjean eventually rescues little Cosette from her avaricious guardians and raises her as his daughter. But human misery is bubbling up into political revolt, and Cosette falls in love with one of the students who, with working people and street children, is fighting to take France back for the people. That student, Marius, is injured, and Valjean chooses to rescue him for Cosette’s sake rather than resolve his ongoing conflict with the policeman who has been pursuing him relentlessly. So there are all these people suffering but doing their best to rescue themselves and others, which is beautiful; and many of them die in the effort, which is tragic. The story ends with Jean Valjean on his deathbed, telling Cosette and her now-husband—and the audience—that the most important thing in life is to love.

I’m going to hand out the lyrics to this scene because I know the sound isn’t going to be very good, and then indulge me while I play the scene on my tiny computer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88T3elu2wfE>

“To love another person is to see the face of God.” And Jesus says, “I am the

embodiment of God, and I want you to follow the model I have set of loving others.” To love another person *is* to see the face of God. And *then* you hear the chorus launch into what I can only characterize as a proclamation of the kingdom of God:

It is the music of a people who are climbing to the light  
For the wretched of the earth there is a flame that never dies  
Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise. [The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it, right?]  
They will live again in freedom in *the garden of the Lord* [restoration of Creation]  
They will walk behind the ploughshare, they will put away the sword. [swords into ploughshares]  
The chain will be broken and all men will have their reward!

“Somewhere beyond the barricade is there a world you long to see?” The people—the chorus—asks us, do we have a vision of the kingdom? Surely we do. And therefore, “Will you join in our crusade? Who will be strong and stand with me?” In the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple, I think we have a precursor to the epilogue of “Les Miserables”. God is accessible through the beloved community that seeks to right wrongs and to do justice, to get its hands dirty, to treat one another as images of the sacred. It is not institutions but the servantlike way of being in the world that mediates God to others. It’s how we recognize God—as Abraham Joshua Heschel said of marching with Dr. King, “I felt like I was praying with my legs.”

O God, we give you thanks for your compassion beyond measure. Draw us so close to you that we can rest secure in your love. Overturn the tables of every system that names some of your children as unclean. Comfort and disrupt us with your love. Amen.