

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 03/03/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, March 3rd	John 2:13-22
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A call for a complete system overall?

John's account of Jesus cleansing the Temple stands out from the synoptic Gospels. First, it appears at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than at the end. Second, John seems to have a rather different understanding of what prompted Jesus' anger. How does John's perspective inform us about the institutional church today?

John 2:13-22 Commentary

Unlike the synoptics (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48), John's account of Jesus cleansing the temple complex occurs at the beginning of His ministry a few days after the wedding at Cana (2:12).

¹³ *The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

Except for the boyhood visit to the temple recorded in Luke, the synoptics only record Jesus ever visiting Jerusalem one time and this was during the final week of His ministry – the Passover feast during which He was crucified. Since in Jesus' day the law required every male Jew within fifteen miles of Jerusalem to attend the Passover feast, it should be expected that Jesus would have visited Jerusalem multiple times.

¹⁴ *In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the moneychangers sitting there.*

The scene that Jesus encountered in the temple courts was not an exception but the norm. The traders and moneychangers were a vital part of the functioning of the temple system. The Passover feast would have attracted pilgrims from across the Diaspora. There were purveyors of animals for sacrifices since often a visit to the temple meant a making a sacrifice. The sale of these animals in the temple courts was thus a service of convenience to the pilgrims. A captive audience meant the risk of exploitation. Animals for sale within the temple courts were many times more expensive than those available outside. Pilgrims could bring their own animals, but the temple authorities employed inspectors to examine those animals brought in from the outside to ensure they were perfect and without blemish. Such inspectors charged a fee, and most animals would be rejected. Every Jew over the age of nineteen had to pay a temple tax of half a shekel (worth nearly two day's wages for a laborer). At the time there were many different currencies in use in Palestine such as Roman, Greek, and Syrian coinage. These currencies were appropriate for ordinary debts but were considered unclean. Hence, foreign currencies

needed to be exchanged and thus the vital role of the moneychangers. Of course, the moneychangers charged fees for such transactions.¹

¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

Jesus throws the moneychangers and the vendors out of the temple courts. Some emphasize the reason for Jesus' righteous anger was the exploitation of the pilgrims and the injustice of the system under the name of religion. John differs somewhat from the synoptics in that the emphasis here appears to be trade itself. Some have made the argument that these business transactions disrupted the worship of non-Jews, since these activities took place in the temple courts, including the Court of the Gentiles. Non-Jews were not allowed inside the temple proper.

John	<i>...do not make my Father's house a house of trade (2:16)</i>
Matthew	<i>...but you make it a den of robbers (21:13)</i>
Mark	<i>But you have made it a den of robbers (11:17)</i>
Luke	<i>...but you have made it a den of robbers (19:46)</i>

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Jesus' disciples perceived this event in relation to Psalm 69:9 which is quoted in the text. This Psalm refers to the Messiah. Jesus' act of cleansing the Temple would also have been taken by the Jews as a claim to be the Messiah. Not surprisingly, the Jewish authorities sought for some sign of proof – that He had the authority from God. No doubt they were expecting some miraculous sign. If not, then Jesus would be arrested for disturbing worship (or disturbing the system). Jesus offered a prophetic sign that was only understood after His death. He spoke of "this temple" referring to His body rather than the temple which Herod the Great began reconstructing.

Reflections

Leaving aside the theological implications of whether the temple system was necessary for worship, John's language encourages us to reflect on the "system" itself rather than the abuses of the system emphasized in the synoptics (*a house of trade versus a den of robbers*). At some point this passage challenges us to look at our church system through a similar lens. Systems set up for the benefit of pilgrims to the temple became abused. Are we at a similar risk today? Some point to the use of online payment systems and the fees charged as a modern equivalent to the moneychanger (albeit with less exorbitant fees!). Yet how much of the total money raised by the church enterprise system actually makes it past the buildings (often virtually empty during the week), staff salaries, and the many industries dependent upon the church to the people outside of the church in actual need – whether spiritual or physical? The church has certainly become a big business.

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¹ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 109-111.