

“I Will Raise It Up”

Depths of Love – part #3, from umcsdiscipleship.org

John 2:13-25

[1 - title slide] *Welcome*

Prayer

[2 – circus] How many people here have ever been to the circus? Follow up question: how many of you actually enjoyed the circus? As much as I love the acrobats and the lion tamers, a few things leave me feeling disappointed. The last time I went to a circus, there was a big build up, but during the actual show, every few minutes, someone was hawking a trinket or cotton candy or an elephant ride, instead of just allowing us to enjoy it. I felt distracted by all stuff that just seemed to be trying to squeeze a few extra dollars out of my pocket.

If you’ve ever had an experience like that, you might know the sinking feeling in your stomach. It’s commonly called a “bait and switch” – offer something that wasn’t advertised, and especially when your audience is captive, to take advantage of them. If you’ve ever paid \$15 for a hot dog and Coke at a stadium, you kind of get what I’m talking about.

[3 - temple] This problem is not unique to the present. In Jesus’ time, there was a lot of activity in the temple in Jerusalem, but sadly, not a whole lot of worship. Instead, there were some very unethical and distracting activities taking place.

Our scripture passage today is unsettling, and it’s supposed to be. Jesus is portrayed in a light we rarely envision. Upset. Angry. Getting physical. It would be good for us to examine what exactly he was so upset about.

It is important to remember where exactly in the temple he was. The Jerusalem temple was arranged in sections, courts, each with increasing exclusivity. Women could only go so far. Gentiles, foreigners could only go so far. The very center, the Holy of Holies, was reserved for priests. Jesus, in the outer courts, was standing in the only public part of the temple, where anyone could come for worship.

[4 – Tables, merchants] When Jesus shows up at the first temple court, he sees all the activity, hears all the noise. On the surface, this system had a practical

purpose. They were selling animals for sacrifices, so people would not be forced to bring their own from home, especially over long distances. Additionally, money changers were offering image-free, temple-only coins at the exchange. After all, it would be a sacrilege to pay the temple offerings with graven images.

Jesus sees all this. There is a captive audience being forced to pay exorbitant prices. The Gospel of John specifically mentions the dove merchants. Doves were the cheapest animal for sacrifices, bought by the poorest people. The Gospel of Luke tells us Mary and Joseph offered doves at Jesus' consecration at the temple, when he was just eight or nine days old. Jesus had probably visited the temple many times as a boy, yet in this moment, he felt the full significance, he saw the truth of what was happening. Not worship. Distraction. Extortion. Worshippers cut off from God by a run-away system of sacrifice.

[5 – Jesus confronts merchants] This ticks Jesus off. Obviously, the injustice and greed angers him. Some theologians would say, Jesus is fed up with even the whole sacrificial system itself. After all, Jesus is the Lamb of God. His death would fulfill the law, replacing the need for animal sacrifice to receive forgiveness. Whatever the reason, Jesus sees the problem, and he is ready to do something drastic.

[6 – our church] Stop for a second. What do you see when enter Grace UMC on Sunday morning? What do you hear? What do you feel? What is your focus before, during, and after you spend an hour in God's house?

It's easy for us to say, "Well, of course Jesus was upset. I would be, too! All those crazy animals making tons of noise while I'm trying to pray. All those people more concerned about money than about God! Our church is nothing like the temple!"

Can I challenge that argument? What would Jesus see and hear if he walked into our church on Sunday morning? Thankfully, we don't have any goats, doves, or sheep. However, allow yourself a moment of true vulnerability. Would some things, even in here in God's house, be a distraction or an unnecessary luxury? What would Jesus say about our band? What would Jesus say about the organ and grand piano? Our coffee hours and potlucks? The nice tables and pews? The pretty stained-glass windows? The suit the pastor is or is not

wearing? None of these things are wrong in and of themselves, but do they help or hinder us in worshipping God?

Chew on that thought as you listen to this quote from Dr. Lisa Hancock at UMC Discipleship ministries.

"We spend a lot of time worrying about the songs we sing and the words we say when we design worship, and we should! These are important matters. But...Jesus is concerned with our hearts when we come to worship.

"Would Jesus turn over the tables of the youth group selling tickets to the spaghetti supper...? Would the mission team be in trouble for offering... handmade bags from Guatemala? Of course not... Would they? Would he turn over those tables? What constitutes a shopping mall in the church these days?"

To be honest, I'm not sure what Jesus would do.

[7 – shopping mall] It is hard to unyoke ourselves from our consumerist society. We work, we earn, we spend. It's part of our culture. Yet the danger lies in our desire to view worship as a consumable, like going to a dinner or a movie or even the circus. Is the offering a ticket to get in? Do we put in what we think it's worth? If the potluck food isn't great, will we not come back? (Let alone what we might think of the preaching....Let's not even go there!)

Maybe what happens in our church does not reflect God's greatest desire for us. Maybe we view it like a transaction. We might rationalize, "Well, my sins this week cost me about \$20, so let's see if I can get about \$40 worth of grace. Shoot! I only have a ten." Maybe our conversation doesn't glorify God; maybe it only focuses on our wants.

Think long and hard, friends. What is the value of this place, to us, and to God?

[8 – Jesus overturns tables] Let's return to the scripture passage. Jesus knows the value of God's house. He knows, from the moment he enters the temple, what he sees would never please God. And he does something about it. This is likely the most disruptive, even most disturbing description of the Christ, besides the crucifixion itself. Jesus makes a whip and drives out the animals, and their handlers with them. He tips over the tables and spills the coins. He makes a

mess, but he makes a point. **[9 – scripture]** He shouts, "Stop turning my father's house into a marketplace!" (John 2:16) As Psalm 69:9 says, "Zeal consumed him." What a scene! I can only imagine.

[10 – scripture] We must constantly remind ourselves what the purpose of our worship is: to glorify God Almighty. Jesus reminded the Samaritan woman at the well, (John 4:23-24), "...A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

[11 – scripture] Jesus doesn't just make a mess of the temple, he offers himself as the right sacrifice, as the real temple of God. He promises the Jewish leaders, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." (John 2:19) They think he is talking literally about the temple, but he is referring to his own death and resurrection, the foundation of the church, the very reason we worship on Sunday morning. Nothing stands in the way of Jesus' true purpose, even if he has to take a whip to a bunch of animals and tip over some tables.

Are we that zealous? Would we drive out a "sacred cow" in order to make room for someone else? Does our church radiate God's love, kindness, and an invitation to encounter Christ? We say it's our purpose, but how are we living it? Those are hard questions, and we shouldn't shy away from them.

[12 – Jesus overturning tables again] Maybe it's time to let the Holy Spirit be more disruptive in our lives. As an example, last week, I attended a staff retreat for Lake Louise Summer camp. I drove 600 miles, disrupting my family, my schedule, my preaching, even my mealtimes. When I got to camp, our staff made more decisions that disrupted our traditions. And you know what? We discovered it was OK to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us. I always look forward to camp, because it's a place where God can speak to the campers, to the staff, to me. But camping ministry requires me to give up something precious – stability. I have to make personal sacrifices to be there with God.

The greedy, corrupted system in the temple didn't arise overnight. It slowly built up over the years. One by one, the money exchangers and animal keepers built up their little economy, and the people accepted it, one compromise at a

time, until the whole system was so overwhelming, it took radical action from Jesus to change it. I don't even know if the next day, those buyers and sellers were still there. Maybe. By AD 70, the entire temple was destroyed, and the Jewish people were forced to make radical changes to their worship.

[13 – cross] My hope and prayer is that such a radical change won't be necessary for us to reclaim the heart of what we are here for: To allow Jesus to change our lives. To surrender to him. To admit our brokenness and pride, our frustrations and complaints, to say we are sorry for turning something that was supposed to be all about him into something that is only about ourselves. Our words, our songs, our sermons, our plans...the whole enchilada. When we care more about the minor details than we do about the God whom we serve, a house cleaning is in order.

Let's promise something, to God and to ourselves. Let's always make this about Him, not about us, not about our preferences. Let's bring a sacrifice of praise to Him. Let's make our singing, praying, giving, and serving about Him. And let us allow each other to gently bring us back on track when we forget. If we do that, Jesus will indeed raise us up with him.

[14 – title slide] Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Psalm 69:9a - "Zeal for your house consumes me."

Reflection Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus cleared the temple? What would you have done if you had been there?
2. What is most important to you about worship in the church? Why do you feel that way?
3. What does it mean to you to be "authentic in worship?" How do we as the church achieve that goal?
4. When is it easy to be distracted in church? How do we regain our focus on Christ?
5. Lent is about returning to God. What might we give up in this season so that we can return to God? What might we take up in its place?
6. How has God raised up our worship? How has God raised up our souls?