

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 3rd Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2015

It Depends on Who You Ask

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March 8, 2015

John 2:13-22

What would you think if Session decided to require that your offering each week be made only with those golden dollar coins, that no checks or currency would be acceptable? Further, to make it easy for you, Session allowed BB&T or Wells Fargo to set up tables in the social hall where you could cash your checks or convert your currency into those golden dollars, for a fee of course, let's say 20%

You would blow your top, just as Jesus did when he encountered money-changers doing exactly that on the temple grounds.

The story of Jesus overturning the tables of the money-changers in the temple is told in all four gospels but there is a big difference in how John tells the story as compared to the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In the synoptic gospels the story happens during Passover a few days before Jesus' trial and crucifixion. He is accused among other things of profaning the temple, an act of blasphemy.

But who was actually profaning the temple, Jesus or the money-changers and animal sellers? Quoting the introduction to the popular History Channel show Pawn Stars, "It depends on who you ask."

John's version of the story doesn't happen just before the crucifixion at all --- it happens three years earlier at the start of Jesus' ministry. As the Rev. Mark Tilly, our daughter Karen's pastor in Prescott, Arizona pointed out in a sermon on today's scripture reading, John doesn't always coincide in his chronology with the other three gospels. John rearranges things and puts them where he wants to serve his purpose in telling the story of Christ. This is just one of many places where scripture contradicts itself but is it important? No it isn't. It is the sense of the story that matters, not exactly when it occurred.

John's version of the story has another difference from the synoptic gospels --- not only does Jesus get angry, he gets violent. Jesus who tells us to turn the other

cheek makes a whip out of cords, a cat-o-nine tails, and drives the money-changers and the merchants out of the temple grounds along with their animals. Why did he do that? What was wrong with the vendors being there in the first place? After all Mosaic Law, the Torah, teaches Jews that they must offer sacrifices when they worship in the temple. Aren't those dealers just selling animals which can be purchased for sacrifice? What is wrong with that?

Also Passover brought many thousands of people from all over the Roman world to Jerusalem and to the temple. Jews were obliged to pay a temple tax in Jewish, not Roman money. Roman coins depicted the emperor as a god. They were thus unacceptable for payment of the tax. Can you imagine the furor in a Christian congregation if US coins depicted Satan? The representatives of BB&T or Wells Fargo in the social hall would be there to accept the satanic coins and exchange them for those attractive golden dollars. That is why the money-changers were at the temple, to convert Roman coins to acceptable Jewish coins so that the pilgrims could pay the temple tax.

The merchants selling animals were there for several reasons. First was the obvious fact that pilgrims from afar could not easily drive a sheep or ox all the way to Jerusalem. It was far easier just to buy them in the city or at the temple.

So what was Jesus' problem? Jewish money was required for the temple tax and the Torah required animal sacrifices. Weren't these money-changers and vendors just providing a needed service?

"It depends on who you ask."

Could it be that Jesus, not the vendors was actually profaning the temple? In today's world with our 24/7 cable news networks who are always scrambling for something to say, some of those networks would most likely take the vendors' side of the issue. After all isn't what they are doing good for the economy? Isn't Jesus disrupting free trade and hurting small business?

Let me give you some more information.

First of all, the vendors and money-changers were not actually in the temple proper but were in the courtyard within the temple walls near the front entrance. They were in the social hall so to speak. The high priest Annas and his family controlled the stalls where the animals were kept and Annas had a real racket going on. Animals

offered for sacrifice had to be “without blemish” under Mosaic law and Annas had agents to inspect any animals to be offered for sacrifice. You can guess what generally happened. Most animals were ruled to be blemished. When that happened, the worshipper had no choice but to buy another animal from a vendor at one of the stalls which Annas controlled. The price would be highly inflated and, since most pilgrims couldn't readily take their animals the long distance back to their home country they would have to sell it at a loss. To whom? To the agents of Annas of course who in a few days would sell it to another worshipper as an unblemished sacrifice. Quite a scam wasn't it? Annas had become incredibly rich and was getting richer by the minute.

Then there were the money-changers. Every Jewish man 20 years old or older had to pay the temple tax with a Jewish coin, not a Roman one. Generally the chosen coin was a Tyrian stator which had a high silver content. A Tyrian stator was worth one shekel versus the temple tax of one-half shekel. So, unless a man could join together with another man so that the one coin would pay for both, he had to change his coin for a smaller coin of acceptable value. It wasn't easy to get the right kind of coin of the correct value and the money-changers were getting wealthy on their exchange fees.

Imagine that while you were trying to pray here there would be all of the noise of sheep and goats bleating in the social hall, oxen bellowing and people haggling over exchange rates with the constant clatter of coins being counted out.

It would be a nightmare but that is what people were encountering at the temple.

Vendors and money-changers dishonestly profiting from the worshippers while making so much noise that it would be virtually impossible to pray.

Andreas J. Kostenberger explained it this way: *“The temple establishment has amassed excessive wealth in Jesus' day, which made the merchants and money-changers part of a system that exploited the poor for the alleged purpose of beautifying and administering the affairs of the temple. The sale of sacrificial animals and money-exchange should have been facilitated near the temple rather than within its walls. This, incidentally, is exactly what had been done earlier in Israel's history when the animal merchants had set up shop across the Kidron Valley on the slopes of the Mount of Olives.”* (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Clinton E. Arnold, ed, 2002.)

One might wonder if when Mary took the infant Jesus to present him at the temple, she had to buy a pigeon for the required sacrifice from the temple vendors.

So who really was profaning the Lord's Temple? Annas, the money-changers, and the merchants --- not Jesus. Jesus said, "*Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market.*" (NIV)

Jesus' anger was justified just as you would be if Session set up a similar situation in the social hall. The Lord's house is where we honor God. It is not a business. To act as the merchants and money-changers did was clearly blasphemy, Mosaic Law or not. If he had been asked, Moses would have agreed with Jesus.

Amen.

Note: All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011