

First Presbyterian Church
John 2:13-22, “The Importance of Purpose”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/3/2024

I remember playing in the back yard as a kid, and seeing my Dad walk out of the house, open the garage door and then stand there and say—
“Okay, so what am I here for again?”
I’m only in my mid 40s, but I can already relate.

But it’s an important question to ask: “What are we here for?”
What are we here at church for? Or even, why are we here on earth?
What is the meaning and aim of your daily activities and plans?

Early in the 21st century, pastor Rick Warren
wrote a wildly popular book on this question called,
The Purpose Driven Life.

It was so popular that I wanted nothing to do with it,
because I can’t stand fads.

But there are some really good moments in this book. Here’s one of them.
Warren writes:

“It’s not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by and for God’s purpose.”

This is something that Jesus understood at such a deep level.
Jesus knew with great conviction what God was up to in the world
and how he should express God’s will in his own setting.
As a result, he acted with clarity of purpose that caught people off guard
and caused them to question how he could be *so sure*.

This passage from John 2 is one of those moments.
It takes place very early in Jesus’ ministry.
At this point in John’s gospel, Jesus has been baptized,
he’s called...eh...about six disciples,
and he’s turned water into wine at a banquet.

Now Jesus is coming to Jerusalem just before the Passover,
which of course is also the setting of the Gospel's climax
during Jesus' passion.

Coming to the temple in Jerusalem was a big deal.

We have to understand that it was not just *a* temple,
but *the only* temple that was
sanctioned for worship in all of Israel.

Because of this, Jerusalem was also the power center of the country,
and the temple was the greatest symbol
of Israel's religious and political power.

During the second temple period, the Sanhedrin, a group of 71 judges
who functioned like a supreme court, met *in* the Temple itself.

So Jesus has journeyed with his fledgling band of disciples
to the highest seat of cultural power in Israel.

In verses 14 John describes a fairly mundane scene:

**“In the temple courts Jesus found people selling cattle, sheep and doves,
and others sitting at tables exchanging money.**

By comparison, verse 15 reads more like something from an
absurd film script than what we expect out of Jesus meek and mild:

**“So he made a whip out of cords,
and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle;
he scattered the coins of the money changers and
overturned their tables.”**

Do you have any idea of how big the temple courts are?

Historians know that at this time, the place where
animals were sold and where money was exchanged
was in the Gentile Courts of the temple.

These courts were the outer ring of the temple complex,
and they stretched about 300 meters from East to West,
and 450 meters from North to South.

This was the only place where **Gentiles** could go in the temple area.
In fact there was a sign written in Greek and Latin that said,
“We will not be held responsible for the probable death
of any Gentile who enters the inner courts of the Temple.”
So the outer court was the Gentile’s only space to worship Yahweh.

We don’t know exactly how much **business**
was going on in these courts when Jesus showed up that day,
but the ancient historian Josephus tells us that in 66 AD,
255,000 lambs were sacrificed there for Passover.
That gives you a sense of how massive this area was
(and how much money was involved.)
The Court of the Gentiles was like a literal stock market
of animal dealers and people
exchanging foreign currencies.

Now imagine Jesus running all around this huge area, yelling at people,
and flipping over everyone’s tables.
This wasn’t just like a school-yard game of king-of-the-castle.
This was an unbelievable spectacle.

While Jesus is causing this massive disruption of ordinary Temple business,
he’s shouting out, “Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”
I’m all about following in the footsteps of Jesus,
but I cannot adopt this approach to preaching.
I just don’t feel as comfortable with it as Jesus did.

But if I feel uncomfortable, could you imagine
what the disciples were thinking?
Apparently it caused the disciples to remember
a quote from the Old Testament,
“Zeal for your house will consume me.”

That line is from Psalm 69:9.
This is a Psalm of David that describes his isolation
in pursuit of God’s will, the way he endures scorn and shame
in the face of his enemies.
The Psalmist, David, feels like a foreigner
in his own family.

Why did King David feel that way?

David wrote, **“For zeal for your house consumes me,
and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.”**

This is the verse that comes to the disciple’s mind.
They see Jesus behaving like someone consumed
by a singular passion for what God is up to in the world.

Another prophetic text that helps us understand this scene
comes from Isaiah 56.

The prophet Isaiah declares that God will be bound to
and give them joy in the **house of prayer**,
which is...the Jerusalem temple.

The prophets knew that God ultimately wanted to draw *all nations*
to worship the One True God through Israel.
But in this scene that’s taking place *in the court of the Gentiles*,
there is no possibility for people
to actually worship or pray out there,
it’s filled with animals
and people doing business.

So the business of religion was getting in the way of allowing people
who weren’t Jewish to come and worship.
That was no problem for the other rulers of Jerusalem,
but it to Jesus, it was a massive disgrace.

Through this action of kicking all these people out of the Gentile courts
Jesus has thrown down the gauntlet before the religious establishment
and made his purpose clear:

**Jesus came to bring honor to God
and he will not back down to those who
twist God’s purposes for personal gain.**

*When we understand what Jesus’ purpose was in life,
it helps us discern our own purpose in life,
it clarifies our vision and cuts through the distracting noise.*

The goal of our lives is to honor and glorify God in all things.
That can happen in countless ways through all manner of vocations
and in every form of personality and interest.

But whoever you are and whatever you do,
your life should honor the Creator.

When that happens, we make space for others to do the same.
That's what we learned last night from the youth who shared with us
from Mending Wings.

The people in the Temple courts want answers:
**“What sign can you show us that gives you
the right to do these things?”**

Jesus says, **“Destroy this Temple and in three days
I will raise it right back up again.”**

What an arrogant thing to say. It's unseemly.
Unless ... Jesus really is who John chapter 1 says he is:
**“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things were made;
without him nothing was made that has been made.”**

A person who is the incarnate Word of God could say that.

Jesus also meant a different Temple than the one the crowd was thinking of.
He meant the Temple of his body.
Destroy this human vessel within
which the Spirit of God resides
and I will raise it up again in three days.

What does all of this mean?

It means that if we are the people who follow Jesus the Living Word,
and we are filled with God's Spirit,
then our very bodies are temples to the Lord.

Jesus was zealous for the temple of God
but also recognized that there was a more enduring kind of temple
where God would dwell among the people.

Jesus taught us that every human being – every single one – is designed
to be Temple for the Spirit of God.

Now, think about this:

If Jesus was so upset about the exclusion of Gentile outsiders from worshipping in the Temple courts with cows and doves, if he was angry that people twisted God's will there, what do you think he feels about the present day activities in the modern nation of Israel?

On October 7th when 1,400 Israelis were massacred?

Since then, 30,000 Palestinians slaughtered, including hundreds this week while standing in line for food?!?

Some try to justify this through making appeals to the holocaust.

But how can injustice against humanity justify injustice against humanity?

God is so horrifically dishonored by these things.

No one should support the architects of this insanity, whether we're talking about the Israeli Defense Forces or Hamas, or the politicians who enable them.

We have to remember what Jesus' purpose was so we can identify our own purpose and not be coopted by evil people who want to justify their evil actions in the name of God.

"Zeal for your house consumes me," the Psalmist wrote.

If the house of God is the human heart, then our zeal as God's people today must be for people who suffer.

Our purpose is to honor Jesus the Living Word of God by rejecting the logic of coercive power and violence.

Why are we here? We are here to embrace reconciliation and to demonstrate the way of love in Jesus' name.

I want you to hear again the quote I read from Rick Warren at the beginning of the sermon.

I suspect it will ring differently for you now:

"It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by and for God's purpose."

Now, we cannot control what people do in wars far away.
But we can control how we speak and how we live in our own setting.

Jesus knew his purpose, and that changed the world.
If we also submit to God's will for our lives,
there's no telling what the gracious, unceasing, all-loving
purpose of God might do.