Springfield Presbyterian Church

March 7th, 2021

Third Sunday of Lent

Turning the Tables

1. Sacred Spaces

One of my greatest joys, is that I have had the privilege to enter so many sacred spaces and be in awe of the architecture and the hushed light that shines through stained glass. One of my favorite places is Iona Abbey. Yet it has possibly been the cathedrals that I accidently ran into during travel that have left the greatest impact on me.

I remember wandering the streets of Ulm, Germany and coming upon a large cathedral in the middle of the square and entering in. There was no one there, other than an elderly woman near the altar in which we tried to converse in broken German, but otherwise I sat among the pews, prayerful, amazed, and taking in the moment. The city streets of Ulm were busy, naturally, as most cities are, yet when I walked into this space, I no longer knew I was in the urban landscape. I had a chance to break with the reality of that hurried pace and despite my poor German, to know that God’s love and God’s presence comes in all languages and all places.

During this COVID experience, we have often claimed that we are more than a building, and we are – we are much more than a building. Yet I am grateful for those places where we can seek sanctuary, literally – where we find refuge, and where we can take a break from the normal pace of a busy life and step into a space where time seems to stand still. The sacred silence is joyful as it is humbling, and it stops us in our tracks to help us refocus on what is important and what we call holy.

So, when Jesus comes to the temple for some sacred silence and time to pray, I think he is pretty justified in his anger to see it become a marketplace. I can’t imagine that sacred space in Ulm, Germany with a marketplace. I’m not even wild about those cathedrals and churches that charge a fee to enter, though it is understandable that upkeep is tremendous, I continue to believe that the places in which we call God’s own should be open for all. When we get lost in souvenirs, I think we’ve missed the invitation, to sit and be and rest in God’s arms.

Yet, I think it is still uncomfortable for us to imagine our Savior with a whip in hand, wailing and calling out these people in the marketplace. Our Savior, our shepherd, our gentle Messiah, the parable prophet, and the miracle maker – all of these descriptions seem so far from who we see today in the Gospel of John.

1. Turn the Tables

While it may be hard for us to first imagine, again, Jesus is seeing his Father’s house become a marketplace, not a place for the holy and sacred prayers and praises of the faithful. Yes, it might be hard to imagine, but Jesus is fully justified to be angry, because the priorities have shifted and this place that was called holy became a place of greed.

Jesus’ approach gives us an opportunity to question what we consider to be holy and sacred. Where are those places that give you pause and allow you to connect with God? What happens in that place that turns it from the ordinary into something extraordinary? What was it about those moments you’ve had where you have felt God’s presence near – what did the space look like, how did it feel, what was around you?

It seems unlikely that your answers to these questions would be, ‘a mall, a grocery store, or any arena.’ The answers that I would imagine would sound more like what I first posed – those quiet sanctuaries, or maybe the rustling of leaves on a nature path or sat in a boat in the middle of the water as you listen to the water lapping. Often, what is sacred, does not seem to come from the marketplace – it comes from something that creates pause and awe within.

1. The temple but not the temple

There’s an interesting duality though, in this passage, because Jesus is telling the people to destroy the temple and he will raise up the temple in three days. To be fair, I would also be among the people quizzically looking at Jesus, because this temple that they are in has been under construction for forty-six years. It seems unlikely, at best, even believing in miracles, that Jesus would be able to succeed this great feat.

But that’s not what Jesus is saying, and again, he’s kind of speaking in a code that we can only see in hindsight. He’s saying that the temple is his body, that the temple is the closest you will come to God and to experiencing holiness. He is the embodiment of the temple, of all things pure, and good, and loving. And the three days speak to the three days that will come later on, as we await resurrection.

So we are essentially saying two things here, which might seem to contradict each other, but pair well: we are saying that the places where we experience God should be holy and cared for and kept as a sacred space – yet we are also saying that it is more than the building that makes it holy, it is the people within it who are equipped with God’s Spirit to discern God’s movement in this world. We live in a yes, and – moment, where both the place and the people are important, for this church is our temple, but so are our bodies, meant to be treated with love, care, and respect, and equipped already for the good work of Jesus Christ.

1. Setting Aside

I have so many questions for you this morning and I wish we could all be sitting down in a circle, enjoying fellowship, and waiting and wondering at these words of Scripture. I want to hear again how you’ve found God before – those places that have felt holy and sacred. I also want to ask you how you have created the space within yourself for God’s kingdom to be realized. How do you treat your body? Are you loving, giving care, and allowing the body and brain and soul to meld in quiet spaces of reflection and time to catch your breath?

During this Lenten season, we are called to slow down. We are called to remember that we are not a building, but a people – but we are also called to remember that God dwells in both, in all, places, if we are but willing to watch and wait, to listen and create, to slow down and let God be. That is my charge to you, particularly this week, to carve out the holy spaces in your physical world and the holy spaces within your physical being to be spaces where God’s love can dwell, where God’s justice can reign, and where God’s promises are realized. Amen.