

Text: John 2:13-22 - Jesus Cleanses the Temple
Date: March 15, 2009 – 3rd Sunday in Lent
Title: “The Money Changer”
Theme: Jesus’ boldness came from knowing he was doing God’s work.

I had really only been working the Temple for a year or so. It was a business I inherited from my father. As long as I could remember, he’d changed money at the Temple.

I see you rolling your eyes. You hear me say that that now and you call me a sinner. But at the time, most people just saw it as a necessary thing. The priests wouldn’t let you bring Roman money into the Temple, and I got that – they didn’t want to see Caesar’s head in God’s house – especially not with Caesar claiming to be God himself and all. So when you wanted to pay the temple tax, when you wanted to buy a goat for the offering, you came to me.

It was *mostly* an honest business. But a man’s gotta live, you know. And seriously, you’re going to criticize me? Today you build churches with coffee shops and bookstores right off the worship space. Then you sell lattes made from coffee beans picked by kids living in some rainforest getting paid a buck a day.

Please. Spare me the self-righteousness. I saw my work as facilitating a religious experience. Those Jesus trinkets you’re so fond of, you

know, the keychains and t-shirts and what-not – explain to me again their spiritual significance?

Anyway, my old man had some connections. You had to if you were going to work the Temple. You needed to have a friend on the inside: a powerful Pharisee or a Sadducee at least; if you knew a member of the Sanhedrin you were set.¹ And Pop knew everybody who was anybody in Jerusalem. You should have seen his funeral...holy men falling all over each other to pray for him.

So I picked up where he left off. There weren't any other sons, so it wasn't like I had to fight anyone for it. Some of the older guys, they resented my coming in. Hoped their boys might take my spot. But the old man's connections (and his money) were still good.

Like I said, I hadn't been working really that long when this, well, at the time I didn't know whether to call him a preacher or a prophet or what – but this *guy* from Galilee showed up. You have to give those Galileans credit – I think everyone from up there is nuts. Every Passover, they would cross over about forty miles of Samaritan territory just to get here. I always tried to cut them a break, I figured they'd suffered enough, what with the trip and all. I know / wouldn't

do it, religious obligation or no. God ain't that special, I'd wade through forty miles of Samaritans for a visit.²

I remember that day so clear because I knew something was up, almost from the beginning. I always tried to get to the Temple by dawn.

That was my thing. If you didn't, someone would end up in your spot, and like they say, location is everything.

Along the way I'd typically see a handful of men on their way to the Temple to offer their morning prayers. Usually it was the same crew, older guys mostly. Now this close to Passover I expected more with all the extra people in town, but it was pretty normal for these pilgrims to be at it kind of half-heartedly, just 'cause they were worn out from the trip. But not this Galilean preacher and his people.

As I came by, it seemed like they had already finished their prayers. Now they were debating scripture – first with each other and then with anyone in earshot. They were talking a whole lot about 'the kingdom of God' and other stuff I'd heard about but never put much stock in. The preacher tried to get me to stop and listen, but I just kept going. I had to get to work.

All morning long people kept asking me, "Who is that preaching out there?"

I kept saying, "I don't know, he's not local."

I could tell the one guy who asked was a Galilean, and since he was about my age, I made the mistake of asking him – it was a lame joke really, “I don’t know, didn’t you bring him with you? Why do all these religious fanatics come out of Galilee, anyway – something in the lake up there?”

He didn’t laugh. He looked at me very seriously and said, “You have to go and hear this man Jesus. He is either a total fool or the wisest man you’ll ever meet.”

I said, “Um...my vote is for...fool. You really believe that God talks to people?”

I’ll never forget what he said then: “I believe God might be talking to him.”

And I blew it off, or tried to. “Ok, whatever, here’s your 10 denarii in Temple shekel. Pleasure doing business...enjoy your stay in the City of David.”

“Seriously,” the guy said. “Hear him. Hear Jesus.”

I thought about that conversation the rest of the morning. And I didn’t make any more jokes. I’m not a real religious man, but the thought that God was actually talking to someone...I wondered what that meant for us. Did it mean that there was some *hope* for God’s people?

About noon, I was hungry. So I called one of the street kids who I trusted to go get me lunch without running off with my money and sent him out to the city to find me something. He had just left when I looked up and saw...him.

I could tell right away that whatever happened next, it was *not* going to be good. He had at least five or six guys walking close with him, and a whole crowd of people following behind. And he was moving fast, right toward me. I had scored the end spot, as usual, so he got to me first. Location really is everything, isn't it? Something was in his hand, but he kept it down, so I couldn't tell what it was.

As he walked the last few feet, no one said anything. It was just this silent mass of people coming at me. Then Jesus stood in front of the table, squared his shoulders to me, and looked me right in the face. I couldn't read him. I couldn't tell if what I was seeing was anger or just...disappointment. I thought once more about what the Galilean had said, "God might be talking to him." And I started to kind of stammer, "Rabbi, I've heard a lot about..."

I didn't get any more out. With that, he raised up his arm and brought down what he had in his hand right on the table. I saw now that it was a whip he'd made out of some strands of rope. And then my money

was everywhere; it was like a free-for-all, people were all over the ground scooping it up. I started to open my mouth, started to reach across the table for him, but one of his guys reached for me, and so I shut up. I wasn't going to take on a mob.

That whole time, Jesus never looked away. He said only this: "Why would you do this to your people? My Father's house is not a marketplace! Now you go, get out of here!"

For a split-second I thought, "YOUR father! YOUR father! My father worked this Temple before either one of us was even born!"

But then he was gone, on to the next table and the next. His followers were right behind. The more pandemonium they caused, the faster they went. Pretty soon, all you could hear were cattle lowing and sheep and goats bleating but mostly what you heard was people shouting. I think it took a whole platoon of guards to calm that mess down.

I *did* leave the Temple that day. I didn't have any more money, after all.

But in a day or two I did go back – what else could I do? Now, though...yeah, I think about giving it up. My fees are lower than they used to be, but that hasn't really been enough to ease my

conscience. I hoped it would be. But I guess the man from Galilee was right, the whole thing is a mess.

I never saw Jesus again. I never got to hear him preach. I do know the city was in an uproar a couple years later when they crucified him. Tell me you didn't see *that* coming. You know, I was surprised he lived through the day he chased us all out of the Temple.

I still think about him, though. Was God talking to him? Yeah, I think probably. Was he a fool? Well, yes, but no. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew how dangerous it was, and he did it anyway. I think he did it *precisely* because God was talking to him.

That's a kind of courage that I've just never known. Never. That day, honestly, I wanted to kill Jesus. But I walked away respecting him, even admiring him. Because people just don't have that kind of courage to do the right, not when it's the risky thing to do. We say, I'm just one person. I can't do anything.

I wouldn't know anything about it, but maybe the difference is that when God talks to you, when you know that God's with you, maybe then you *can* do the right thing. Maybe then you can have that kind of courage. I don't know.

You know, Jesus was just a preacher from Galilee, but he seemed to me to be the most powerful man I ever met. I always thought about power as money and connections, and the people you knew.

But you know what, I wonder if power isn't just hearing God speak to you, so that you know what needs to be done.

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Succasunna UMC, Succasunna NJ

¹ I can't find much about how this whole thing worked – you may not be all that interested in this – but I was curious whether these merchants and moneychangers worked directly for the Temple or whether they were kind of like “independent contractors” who paid a fee or a percentage to the Temple authorities to be able to operate there. Maybe neither is true, maybe they were completely independent operators. One of the functions of the moneychanger, apparently, was to assist Temple authorities in collecting the annual tax levied on all Jewish males and collected around Passover for the upkeep of the Temple. So the moneychangers may have been performing a beneficial public function here (See “Coinage” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.)

In any case, this is to say that I have no idea how these arrangements worked, so most of the background on this money changer is total fiction – but I find it interesting to consider.

The bit about converting Roman money to Temple money, which was usually non-objectionable coinage from the city of Tyre, is true. Roman money wasn't acceptable for payment of the temple tax or for the purchase of animals for sacrifice. But the Romans wouldn't let the Temple mint its own coinage, so they used Tyrian money.

² You may be familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10. The Samaritans were descendants of the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had its capital at Samaria and was conquered by the Assyrians around 720 BC. The Assyrians had a theory about dealing with conquered peoples. They believed that by taking some of the population of a newly conquered area and forcibly relocating them, then replacing them with other people from another part of the empire, you could break down the unity of a people and prevent a revolt. So that's what they did in Samaria, which led to a mixing of races and religious traditions in the area. For this reasons, the Jews who lived in Galilee and Judea (the region around Jerusalem) considered Samaritans questionable on both ethnic and religious grounds. That's why the parable of the Good Samaritan is surprising and subversive.