

The Disruptive Entry

TEXT: Luke 19:41-48

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 17, 2024

In all four gospels, Jesus causes a ruckus in the temple at some point. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it happens right after Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time—the event we’ve come to call the Triumphal Entry and which we’ll celebrate next week as “Palm Sunday.” On Earth 2, in John’s gospel, Jesus disrupting activities in the temple happens at the start of his ministry, right after he turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana. John tells things the way he does for his own reasons, so this week we’re staying on Earth 1 to make things a bit simpler.

The accounts of Jesus disrupting the temple are not identical even in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; but, since I’m shooting for simplicity this week, I picked Luke, which is the most pared-down version of the story. If you’ve run into this story before this morning, you likely have images from the other gospel accounts in your head. Artists like to reach for John’s version here because it’s the most dramatic. In John’s version, Jesus actually makes his own whip, which he doesn’t use on any people, but instead turns over tables, frees the sacrificial animals that were for sale in the temple courts, and generally causes mayhem.

But, despite being not only the longest gospel but the longest book of the entire New Testament, it’s Luke who gives us the most concise version of this story. In Luke, Jesus just drives out those who were selling things. No tables are overturned, no doves released, no whip or other theatrics. For all we know in Luke, Jesus might just have sternly told them to get out.

There are other differences, too. In both Matthew and Mark’s version, the story is intertwined with Jesus cursing a fig tree and the tree’s subsequent demise. Luke has Jesus deliver a parable about a fig tree two chapters later, but no fig trees were harmed in Luke’s telling of that parable.

By stripping down what Jesus does in the temple to its simplest form, Luke allows us to see a point that can easily be missed amidst the falling tables, flying doves, and an unfortunate fig tree in the other accounts. However disruptive Jesus was in driving out people selling things in the temple, it wasn’t *so* disruptive that they had to shut down the place.

It made the temple leadership mad, but it wasn’t so big of a deal that suddenly all of Jerusalem was talking about the guy who came in and gave the sellers in the temple their comeuppance. Jesus isn’t banned for life from entering because of his disruption or charged with a crime. He’s not ordered to offer sacrifices for some kind of sin. In Luke, right after Jesus says, “My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers,” the next verse says, “Every day he was teaching in the temple.”

And that’s what he’s doing across the next several chapters—teaching in the temple, watching a poor widow contribute to the temple treasury, sparring with Sadducees, who were the class of priests, and instructing the throngs of people who came to the temple to hear him teach.

An interesting note here is that, in Luke, this is Jesus’ first visit to the temple since way back in chapter two when Jesus entered as a boy of twelve. Luke is the only one who gives us that story. Back then, Jesus came as a student—wiser than his years, but sitting at the feet of those who were teaching in the temple at the time. His depth of knowledge and astute questions surprised the teachers, even while his parents were running around Jerusalem trying to figure out why he wasn’t with them in the caravan headed back to Galilee. But he was still the student, not the teacher.

Now, almost exactly two decades later, Luke shows us Jesus as the teacher that new young boys came to learn from, along with throngs of adults who hung on his every word. I think the jump from Jesus the student in the temple to Jesus the teacher in the temple, along with eliminating all the other details of this event, reinforces the idea that Luke’s concise focus is on Jesus the rabbi, Jesus the teacher, and what Rabbi Jesus is trying to teach anyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear.

At twelve, Jesus entered the temple in submission to his elders; now he comes with his own authority and can set the rules for when, where, and how he will teach. The action of driving out the sellers was part of that teaching, which continues day after day in that very temple until the beginning of the Passover festival and the final days and hours of his life.

In terms of what comes *before* the adult Jesus returns to the temple, Jesus is not in a good mood, despite the parade in his honor. As the procession of Palm Sunday gets close to the city, Jesus stops. If you go on a Holy Land tour, there's a spot on the road that has been traditionally associated with this place, because you're still partway up the Mount of Olives and it gives you a view of the whole city. Luke tells us, "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'"

The name Jerusalem is the combination of two Hebrew words—Jeru means "they see" or maybe "they will see" (Hebrew doesn't distinguish between the present and future tense) and "salem" means "wholeness" or "completeness." The word for peace, *shalom*, is derived from "salem." The very name of the city of Jerusalem proclaimed, "They will see the wholeness," implying that the city would see the way to become whole, to have peace. But Jesus laments, as he looks down from the mountainside, that the city will not live up to its name, because they can't see—or maybe refuse to see—what it takes to achieve that wholeness and that peace.

It's from that spot, and those tears, that Jesus heads straight to the temple to try to teach them what it takes to bring peace, and his grief turns to anger as he discovers the city's blindness exists even there within the temple itself. But what exactly is the problem? He drives out those selling, so that's a clue, but we need more context to make sure we understand the underlying issue.

As a technical matter, the buying and selling going on inside the temple was designed as a service to those who came to offer sacrifices. There were strict rules about what you had to offer for different kinds of situations, and even stricter rules about the purity of the animal. It couldn't be sick or deformed in any way.

Both to make sure your animal was pure enough and to avoid the hassle of having to haul animals from home if you were coming a distance, the temple provided approved sacrificial animals for purchase.

Complicating matters, the regular currency of the day wasn't accepted. You had to exchange that money for special temple currency to buy your animal. Thus, the money-changers. You exchanged your currency for temple currency with the moneychangers and then went to buy your doves or sheep or whatever from those selling.

All of that, if operating on the up and up, would have been a true service. With people coming to major festivals like Passover from all over the world, nobody wanted to come from Rome hauling animals, which might be perfect specimens when you left, but not when you arrived, and those coming from Egypt would have a different currency than the Romans, which was likely different from the Ethiopian currency and on it goes.

Also, in paying for your sacrifice at the festival, you were also buying your meat for your stay. Those making sacrifices didn't lose the whole animal in the exchange. Ten percent of the meat—the tithe—went to the priests and workers in the temple; the fat was burned to the Lord; and those making the sacrifice got back the rest, with the guarantee that the slaughter of the animal was kosher. So, the system didn't have to be a scam and, on the whole, it was a far more humane way of getting meat than the barbaric industrial farms and slaughter houses we have today.

Remember also, that in the ancient world, temples were banks. That was true for every religion, not just Judaism. So, it's not like people coming to the city could just head over to First Jerusalem Community Bank for a currency exchange. Temples were banks, making the moneychangers a legitimate service, too. So, we're a bit off-base as contemporary readers if we interpret Jesus' disruption of the sellers as forbidding any kind of selling or dealing with money in houses of worship.

We have to look more closely for the problem, which is easier in Luke because most of the details from the other accounts are gone. What remains in Luke is what Jesus says as he drives out those involved with the system, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers.'"

The core message is pretty straightforward. The system designed to serve others and facilitate appropriate worship in the temple had become corrupt in some way, and we can imagine many places where corruption could have crept in. But it's worth checking out the prophets Jesus is quoting here to understand that it is more than an economic wrong that Jesus sees going on around him and that those responsible for the corruption go beyond the random temple workers that Jesus drives out.

Jesus' words are drawn from two of the prophets. The first part, "My house shall be a house of prayer" is a quote from Isaiah 56, and the second part, about the den of robbers, comes from Jeremiah 7. What the two passages share is an emphasis on acting with justice as a precondition for God's presence in the temple. Each passage is also addressing the nation as a whole as represented in its leadership and not particular individuals.

The first part of Isaiah 56 begins with,

"Thus says the LORD:
Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed."

The passage then continues to console those who are frequently excluded from God's house, specifically eunuchs and foreigners. That consolation continues lovingly for several verses and then wraps up with these words:

"All who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for **my house shall be called a house of prayer**
for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered."

The first thing Jesus mentions is what God's house is supposed to be, "a house of prayer for all peoples." But right on the heels of that vision is the second line, from Jeremiah 7, which contrasts God's hope in Isaiah with the reality on the ground. This is from the first 11 verses of Jeremiah 7:

²Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, ... Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. ⁴Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."

⁵For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, ⁷then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever.

⁸Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹Has this house, which is called by my name, become a **den of robbers** in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD."

What's clear when you put those passages together is that what's on Jesus' mind as he's driving out the sellers is not the narrow practice of converting currency and selling animals for sacrifice. It's not even about the particular individuals he drives out. They were symbols of a broader system of injustice that robbed people not only economically, but socially, and spiritually.

With those passages put together, Jesus is thinking first about the promise of God's house being open to all who are sincerely trying to keep God's covenant, "If you truly act justly one with another...then I will dwell with you in this place."

But that's not what's happening and God, speaking through Jeremiah, is floored by the hypocrisy. "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?"

A "den of robbers" doesn't just imply a group of people who steal things. The phrase implies a charge of general lawlessness—a cabal of people who conspire to do whatever it takes to get what they want. And the den is the place where the cabal believes they are safe from prying eyes. God asks in Jeremiah whether the people will actually "come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations?" That's the very definition of a den of thieves.

Jesus isn't only calling out corruption in the particular system of how people obtained acceptable animals for sacrifice. The sellers and moneychangers were just symbols of a much deeper and systemic problem, hiding in plain sight. Robbers thinking they were safe hiding in God's house without any need to change their ways.

The religious leadership based in the temple was responsible for being the voice of justice in the land. That's what the whole system of sacrifice was about at its core—to help people stay in right relationship to God. To purify oneself—to atone, to repent; but, also, to worship, to praise, to offer gifts of gratitude for abundant harvest and healthy families and new birth.

The sacrificial system at the temple was the beating heart of all that. Corruption there meant corruption everywhere and no way to make it right. You can't clean yourself in polluted waters. The corruption in the temple didn't happen because of something particular to Judaism. The corruption in the temple happened because the leadership had sold out the principles of Judaism, including the entire law of Moses, for private gain. Worse, because the religious leaders were tied into the political power of Rome through the Sanhedrin, God's house was made a party to the Roman oppression of the entire nation.

The chief priests understood that Jesus publicly driving out their underlings was symbolic of his desire to publicly expose and end all of the corruption that was lining their pockets and keeping them in positions of both economic and political power. Jesus wasn't just calling out a robbery, he was exposing the den. Luke tells us, "The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him."

In driving out the sellers with the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus is teaching. He's reminding both the people and the leadership of God's original purpose for the temple, the conditions under which God will consent to dwell there, and God's warnings against those who break all of God's commandments while out on the streets and think they will escape exposure because they are hiding in God's house. "Has this house, which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord."

Jesus tries to help all those he encounters along the road, giving a chance for repentance to every scoundrel he meets, literally until his dying breath as he invites a repentant thief being crucified beside him to Paradise—a story that is also unique to Luke.

But turning God's house of prayer into a den of thieves? Turning God's sanctuary for the marginalized, the repentant, and the grateful who gather for worship into a hiding place for the oppressors, the greedy, and the lawless? Absolutely not. God will not dwell in such a house, and neither will Jesus turn a blind eye and teach there. To do so would make him complicit in hiding the den.

While all of human history has been blighted with corruption and abuses of power, there is something uniquely horrifying when it infects the places and people whose power is granted specifically because they are appointed to arbitrate and ensure justice.

When the sanctuary becomes the den of thieves, it's no longer a sanctuary. When the halls of justice rob the widow and the orphan, civil society is lost. When the very system designed for atonement leads to further injustice, there is no longer any way to make us whole. In frustration for what is and grief over what could have been, we weep over the city, the nation, the world that cannot see the things that make for peace.

Exposing the den of thieves by disrupting the core system of the temple was the first thing Jesus did in response to his grief. The late John Lewis would have called it, "Good Trouble." It was the first lesson in his final week of teaching both the city and us what could make for peace. In this world of war and justice both delayed and denied, we can use the refresher. Stay tuned. Amen.