

Draining the Swamp

John 2:13-17

You all know what it means, don't you? Draining the swamp. Historically, it means draining the water out of a mosquito infested marsh or swamp so that the mosquitos can't survive, so they won't continue to spread the dangerous disease of malaria. Get rid of the pests! Get rid of the disease they cause!

And, of course, it has become a very popular and well-used political slogan, a slogan no doubt contributing to the popularity and the successful electoral victory of our current president. Drain the swamp meant that he would go to Washington as an outsider with a promise to get rid of all the politicians and bureaucrats who have become nothing but pests who bring disease and suffering to our country because of their own self-interest or political corruption. With much cynical frustration, many of you would likely say, "More power to him!"

It's a popular theme. Drain the swamp. If I may use that illustration without all of its political overtones this morning, that is what Jesus is doing here at the temple, as we read in John 2. Literally, physically, Jesus sought to rid the temple of those who had so badly and so grievously profaned its holy purpose.

Two introductory comments to begin with, however. There are two common errors or misconceptions that we need to do away with quickly. First, there is no need to impose upon Jesus the sense of a reckless and uncontrollable anger. Jesus didn't lose his temper here and fly off the handle. Anger, yes. Sinful anger, no.

Second, I should say that there is a great deal of discussion among religious scholars about the accuracy of our text, because

the other gospels give the account of Jesus cleansing the temple at the end of his ministry, as he entered Jerusalem that last week of his life. John's account, on the other hand, describes an event that happened at the very beginning of his public ministry, some three years earlier.

There are several solutions offered to that problem. Some say that John wasn't concerned about getting the historical facts in order, but was just teaching us a lesson. William Barclay gives this comment, "John, as someone has said, is more interested in the truth than in the facts...He was not interested to tell men when Jesus cleansed the Temple; he was supremely interested in telling men that Jesus did cleanse the Temple."

Just think about that, about separating the truth from the facts. It's classic liberalism, allowing for a factual error that somehow doesn't affect the nature of what actually happened, factual error but still truth. That is, of course, not only completely illogical, but it also contradicts the whole notion that the Bible is without error, although that doesn't bother those who simply do not believe that John's account is historically accurate in the first place.

But we don't need to spend a lot of time on all that. Just let me tell you the obvious solution. Truth is not separated from the facts, and Jesus cleansed the temple on two occasions, once at the beginning of his ministry, which is recorded for us here in John 2, and once at the end of his ministry, as the other gospels describe. And neither time should we think that lost his temper in a fit of uncontrollable rage.

So what did happen? And why? That's the point, and the beginning of the answer to those questions lies in the proper understanding of,

I. THE NATURE OF A TEMPLE.

What is the temple? What is the significance of the temple? Outwardly, you can't miss the significance. Just look at the content of the Old Testament. Instructions for the building of the temple are found in extensive detail. Beginning in Exodus 25, just after the giving of the law. Then you find chapter after chapter of detailed blueprints for the temple that would be built, from Exodus 25 all the way to the end of the book, Exodus 40. All of which leads to this conclusion,

Ex. 40:34 "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 36 Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. 37 But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. 38 For the cloud of the Lord was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys."

So the temple wasn't just a matter of furniture and decorations. "The glory of the Lord filled the temple." And remember when the ark of the covenant was finally brought into the temple,

2 Chron. 7:1 "When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. 2 And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house. 3 When all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed their faces to the ground on the pavement, and worshiped and praised the Lord, saying: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever."

1 Kings 8:6 "Then the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, into the inner sanctuary of the temple, to the Most Holy Place, under the wings of the cherubim. 7 For the cherubim spread their two wings over the place of the ark, and the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles. 8 The poles extended so that the ends of the poles could be seen from the holy place, in front of the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside. And they are there to this day. 9 Nothing was in the ark except the two tablets of stone which Moses put there at Horeb, when the Lord made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. 10 And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the Lord, 11 so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. 12 Then Solomon spoke: "The Lord said He would dwell in the dark cloud. 13 I have surely built You an exalted house, And a place for You to dwell in forever."

Don't miss all of that. Don't pass over all of that quickly or lightly. Because there is a very clear and obvious significance for the temple, a reason why it was so very important.

A. The temple is the dwelling place of God.

The temple was God's house.

Illus: I have spent a lot of time the past month looking for a house in and around Mt. Airy. A house for my family to live in, a house to call home—and I am looking forward to finally settling in such a home. But I'm particular. There is one house we really like, but it missing one thing, one room we really want. And I have talked to two builders about putting on an addition, a sunroom to replace the existing back deck. That's important to us. It's what we want in a home, our home.

And that's the idea of the temple for God. The details were

important to God, because it was his home. His dwelling place.

The concept of “place” was very, very important in the Old Testament. The “place” was the dwelling place of God.

Deut. 12:5 “But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. 6 There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. 7 And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the Lord your God has blessed you. 8 “You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes— 9 for as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you. 10 But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety, 11 then there will be the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide.”

The temple was the dwelling place for the name of God. Remember Solomon’s words,

1 Kings 5:5 “And behold, I propose to build a house for the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord spoke to my father David, saying, “Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, he shall build the house for My name.”

That’s the temple, a house for God’s name.

One of the wedding gifts Sharon and I received was an original artwork, a small painting of a home with a mailbox out front, and our name is written on the mailbox. We have that

artwork prominently displayed in our house, because our house is the place marked by our name. So it was, all the more, for God. The temple was God’s house, marked by his name. This is where he lived. And, this is where he would entertain visitors, guests. In other words, this is where he would meet with his people.

B. The temple is the meeting place for God and his people.

These two things are related, but how helpful it is to distinguish them. The temple is God’s house. And we are invited to meet with him in his house! In the Old Testament, that meant sacrifices, offerings, as I have already read. “There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.” That’s what it meant to meet with God. It meant bringing your offering!

So that’s where Jesus was going in John 2. It was the passover, according to verse 13. It was the time for God’s people to go to Jerusalem to offer their passover sacrifice at the temple. It was undoubtedly the most significant and more important festival of the whole year, the most important event in the life of any faithful Israelite. “Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”

Now, before we go further in studying what Jesus did, let me clearly tie this concept of the temple with our present day worship. And I don’t have to work very hard to make that connection, because the New Testament is so very clear.

1 Peter 2:4 “Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

That's the church, the New Testament church. A spiritual house. In other words, the temple of God. A place to offer our spiritual sacrifices.

Eph. 2:19 "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

The language is so consistent with everything you read in the Old Testament. We, together, we the church, are the dwelling place of God in the Spirit." This is where God puts his name, here, among us. We are the temple, we the people..., to use that phrase so foundational to our national Constitution. "We the people" are the temple." "We the people" are the dwelling place of God. When we are assemble together, it is here that God meets with us.

And that's why Paul calls the church "a holy temple". That is what we are.

If you ever struggle in your motivation to come to church, please think in these terms. There is a spiritual reality going on here that transcends the ordinary matters of everyday life. Something happens when we are gathered together on the Lord's Day in this place. We are being built into a holy temple, set apart to offer to God the sacrifices of our worship.

Now, the danger that Jesus identified. It was the danger of losing the sense of holiness with regard to the temple. Losing the sense of its sacred honor and importance. In other words, making it a place for buying and selling, a marketplace. In our

context, making it a shopping mall. The danger is this, that you lose the sense of the prominence and pre-eminence of the glory of God's presence, and make the temple ordinary. Worldly. The evidence of that for Jesus was the commercialism he encountered.

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II. THE DANGER OF COMMERCIALISM.

Buying and selling. That's part of ordinary human life. It's a necessary part of ordinary human life. But it is mundane. It is common. It is worldly, that is, necessarily connected to life in this world, in this age, on this earth. And that is,

A. The meaning of profanity.

Profanity is taking something set apart as holy, something considered to be sacred, and using it for common, ordinary causes. And the church is to be sacred, holy. It's not a business.

So ought to beware the dangers of commercialism. This church is not a business. This is a house of worship, or as we read in the second temple cleansing found in Matthew 21, this is a house of prayer.

Mat. 21:12 Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"

A house of prayer. A meeting house for God and his people. A place where God's people come to talk to God, to listen to God. A place and time where we come to offer our spiritual sacrifices which are well pleasing to him.

It's not a place we come to do the business of this world. It

ought to be a place we come to escape the world, just as much as we possibly can. The church is a place where we can gain a foretaste of the experience of heaven, not to engage in the commerce of this world. Because this is a holy temple, and the glory of God's name is here.

We studied this past Thursday night the first petition of the Lord's Prayer, as it is presented in the Heidelberg Catechism. "Hallowed by your name." That is to be our first prayer. The first in priority, the first in importance. That's God's name would be set apart and recognized as being exalted above all other names. In this place.

Our culture does not like things that are holy and exalted. Instead, we like common, comfortable, ordinary, even profane. Nothing is sacred any more, least of all the gathering of God's people in worship. I want to address that tendency as we consider Jesus' cleansing of the temple. Therefore, I want to urge all of you to consider the holy glory of gathering together in this place each Sunday, morning and afternoon. There is nothing ordinary about it, because it is still true that the glory of the Lord fills the temple, his house.

So don't profane the worship of God. Don't relegate it to the category of the ordinary. No, this is some very, very extraordinary. The glory of the Lord fills this place, because this place is the place where his name dwells. This is his house.

I look forward to invite you to my house in the months and years to come, especially after so many of you have already invited me already to yours. I look forward to having a house, a home, where I live, here in this place, where you can come to visit. And I want you to think in those terms about the privilege we have in coming to church, coming to this holy temple. It is not a

common nor ordinary experience at all. Thus we ought not to profane the church by making it look like the world, especially in the exercise of business and commerce. Jesus removed all such profanity from the temple.

His actions point out another danger as well. It wasn't simply the commercialization that he objected to, it was the greed. So he clearly is showing use

B. The dangers of worldly greed.

John's gospel, verse 14, says they are "doing business." But there were no necessary constraints upon their wickedness. Opportunity for abuse and deception abounded. This was an opportunity for sinful men to sin, by extortion, charging exorbitant prices. By taking advantage of the helplessness of the people coming. By requiring bribes and kickbacks, justifying their condemnation as a "den of thieves."

It was the passover. More than anything else, animals were needed for sacrifices. Yet many people had come from a great distance, and would find it necessary to purchase an appropriate animal at the temple, rather than bringing one with them. It is quite certain that the selling referred to here took place in the outer courtyard, the court of the Gentiles. And the money changers had an interest in all this, since transactions and money offerings in the temple had to given only in the approved currency. Men coming from other countries would bring all sorts of coinage with them and this had to be exchanged into acceptable coinage. So there was profiteering. Not simply capitalism, as out of place as even that would have been, but price gouging. Vendors taking advantage of customers, the same way that vendors selling soft drinks at Atlanta Braves baseball games can charge \$7 for a cup of Coca-cola, \$12 for a bottle of beer. Or over \$30 just to park your car.

Maybe you can justify that in the context of capitalistic free enterprise, but you can't justify that in a church, in the temple of God. There is great danger when the church caters to the attraction of worldly greed. So we must be very careful to refrain from any sense of profiteering. Simply put, the church has no business being in business. We have no business conducting business, especially where the potential for financial windfall is present. There should be no opportunity for me, nor for anyone else in the church, to make a profit of the activity of the church. We have to realized the sinful corruptions of men's hearts need to be put to death, not given opportunities to flourish.

There are lots of applications for us, aren't there? We should not be buying and selling merchandise in the church. We need to stay out of the business of buying and selling, profiteering at the expense of others. We are a church, not a shopping mall. We ought not to involve ourselves in commerce, in trading of goods and money. We shouldn't be having bazaars and hot dog sales. So we don't have public fundraisers. We ought not make ourselves an outlet for the latest pyramid marketing opportunity. If you want to have a tupperware party in your home as an individual, then do it! There is nothing wrong with that. But do it in your home. It is not an activity of the church.

If you want to have a yard sale at your home and donate the proceeds to the church, that would be wonderful, and praiseworthy. You would be following Barnabas' own example. But we shouldn't schedule an annual bazaar for the selling of our accumulated goods in the name of the church! When people come to meetings of our church, they ought to be sacred events, nothing as profane and ordinary as what goes on in the shopping malls.

Now, that doesn't mean that everything has to be a worship service. We might have an evening of edifying Christian

entertainment, such as a movie or even a concert, or a dinner and hymn-sing, but as a church, as a holy temple, we need to avoid any pretense of merchandising, buying and selling, profit-making, for that is what Jesus condemns here.

And he does so by demonstrating to us,

III. THE VIRTUE OF ZEAL.

Zeal is an interesting word. It is the root of our word zealous, which is to fully and enthusiastically committed to a particular cause. And the same word can be translated "jealous," which in a godly sense, is the intense desire to protect and to preserve that which is rightly yours.

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That comes from Psalm 69, in which the Psalmist is experiencing great trouble or trial.

Ps. 69:1 "Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. 2 I sink in deep mire, Where there is no standing; I have come into deep waters, Where the floods overflow me. 3 I am weary with my crying; My throat is dry; My eyes fail while I wait for my God."

But he endures, expressing words that obviously represent and symbolize the suffering of Jesus.

Ps. 69:7 "Because for Your sake I have borne reproach; Shame has covered my face. 8 I have become a stranger to my brothers, And an alien to my mother's children; 9 Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, And the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me."

Jesus is concerned to maintain and preserve the glory of God's house, the glory of God's name, the glory of God's honor. And he endures suffering on behalf of the church. So as he

suffers, it is the glory of God that is his chief goal and desire.

He was offended by the merchandizers in the temple because that was an offense against the sacred purpose of the temple. And he was zealous to protect God's honor. He takes action, doesn't he? It is,

A. The active commitment to remove wicked evil from the church.

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His zeal is translated into action. Extreme action. He put them out! He removed the wicked from the church. And we ought to have no less zeal even today.

Paul uses the example of sexual immorality to make this very point in 1 Corinthians 6, that we ought not to boast about the presence of the wicked.

1 Cor. 6:6 "Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

He concludes,

1 Cor. 6:12 "For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."

There is another aspect of this zeal, though. More personally. Not so much applied to other people, particularly the wicked. But with a much more self-directed focus.

B. The active commitment to live out a godly zeal for the sacred glory of the church.

Zeal for the glory of the church. An intense desire to promote and advance the sacred honor of being a holy temple. And that begins with your presence. Zeal for the the house of God begins with your decision to get up out of bed in the morning. Maybe it includes the determination to stay for the afternoon worship service, despite being a little bit tired.

Zeal is an action word, not so much just a matter of emotion or passion. It is the energy of your commitment, the exercise of your determination. What matters, what "eats you up," according to the quote from Psalm 69, what consumes you, is the desire to be a part of the presence of the meeting between God and his people.

Jesus had one over-riding purpose, one all-consuming passion, zeal for his father's house. Zeal for the glory and advancement of his father's house, the church. And therefore, zeal for the advancement of his father's glory.

So it must be of us. An all-encompassing passion. But is it? That's the challenge.

Zealous, zealous for God's house. What a good word. You and I are called to be zealous for the glory of God, made evident in the church of God. Thus the church is not an afterthought. The church ought not to get what you have left over at the end of the week, either in your time or your money. The church ought to come first, for as we are joined together as the church, we are the house of God.

Zeal means that we are those whose lives show an obvious priority to the worship and work of the church. Not because of

external, legalistic conformity. NO, but because the church is the house of God.

Perhaps you need to repent of your lack of zeal. Repent of your willingness to let your place in the affairs of this world be more important than your place here in the church. Perhaps you need to fan into a flame this desire and commitment for the sacred glory of God's holy temple.

Whatever it takes, these words ought to be on our lips just as they were on the lips of Jesus, "Zeal for your house has eaten me up."

That doesn't just mean missionaries, those who go to other countries. That doesn't just mean the minister, the pastor, who devotes himself to the full time work of prayer and the ministry of the word. No, it's for everyone of us. May that holy zeal burn in your hearts, even today, as you take your place in the church, the holy temple, the house of God.