

ALTARED LIFE: The Destruction that Brings Life

John 2:13-22

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Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/altared-life-the-destruction-that-brings-life/

I.

2023 was the year when AI or Artificial Intelligence went mainstream. AI replicates human intelligence processes with machines, such as computer systems. When AI became more available to the average person through programs like ChatGPT, they had a lot of fun asking AI to create an image from a description given. You type in the text, and AI produces an image based on your words and what it has access to from the internet. Like this image I created by telling AI to give me a picture of “a happy sloth eating ice cream in a hammock.” And I LOVE IT. [It's](#) a new desktop background for me. I'm not saying this is my spirit animal, but if I had one, this is pretty much what it would be doing each day.

Sometimes, the images AI creates are amazingly on point, and sometimes, as a machine and not a human, it misses the mark. It reads the words but doesn't understand the true meaning or intention. Someone on the internet asked AI to make an image of “Jesus flipping over the money tables in the temple,” and [this](#) is what AI producedⁱ. I'll confess – I've never imagined this take on Jesus flipping over tables. And to be honest, I'm a little disappointed in myself.

Some of us might be more comfortable with a RAD Jesus flipping over tables than a RADICAL Jesus flipping over tables. Some of us might be more comfortable with a Jesus slow to anger than one who makes quick work of the temple courtyard, sending tables, coins, and doves flying with a whip and strong words. And some of us think there should be a lot more table-turning Jesus in the Gospels.

II.

In ancient Judaism, they had what was called temple theology. In this, the temple was where God was understood to be most present. People would come to the temple to be with God and to offer sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving, and to repent or atone for sin. In Jesus' day, it was common for things to be sold in and around the Temple. The money changers took the different currencies of those who traveled to Jerusalem and exchanged them for temple-appropriate coins, free of engraved images. Merchants sold animals that would be sacrificed to God as part of worship. Since everyone needs a pure or clean animal to sacrifice before going into the temple and people traveled from far away on the high days of Passover, naturally, merchants turned this into a fruitful business. It's like at the movies. You can't go to a movie without some popcorn or candy in your hand, so they sell it to you right outside the theater as you walk in for the price of your firstborn.

All of this is to explain why the Temple looks, sounds, and smells a lot like a barnyard and mini shopping mall in today's Gospel story.

III.

The part of the Temple Jesus clears out was known as “the court of the Gentiles.” It was the one part of the Temple grounds where Gentiles or non-Jews were welcome. It was a place for them to seek and worship the God of Israel in peace and prayer. The inner courtyards became increasingly more exclusive and elite as they led to the center of the Temple. No Gentile could go past their courtyard, but at least they did have a sacred space, right?

But the court for the Gentiles had become a noisy, filthy marketplace that exploited the poor of all nations. With all the chaos of buying and selling, it would have been too noisy for anyone to do much praying or worshipping of God. These merchants and money changers are not where they belong; they have invaded sacred space. Their priorities and greed were preventing the true worship of God. They are using the temple to put a religious stamp of approval on their business, and it makes Jesus angry.

So, out of great love for those being kept from true worship of God, Jesus upturned tables and chairs, scattering coins and cattle. He knocked over the velvet ropes, ran off the bouncers, and reminded everyone of Isaiah’s words from chapter 56 when Jesus quotes them saying, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56:7b)

Jesus’ anger and frustration did not come from the actual customs of the temple. As a faithful Jew, Jesus would have participated in these practices of the faithful growing up. Jesus’ anger came from the way people were twisting these practices, the way people were making a profit off the poor, the way the religious institution protected business as usual rather than seeing what God was doing right in their midst through Jesus, the true temple in whom God dwells.

But the people didn’t understand. They didn’t know what to make of Jesus’ action and words. You could rebuild this temple in three days? It was like Jesus typed that statement into ChatGPT and the image the people produced was the absurd image of that grand building that took 46 years to build could be destroyed and then rebuilt brick by brick in three days. But they, and the disciples didn’t understand yet what Jesus meant. In fact, this much is said in the crowd’s reaction to him: “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Pastor Michael Hoy writes, “It is a clear sign then-and-there, the people did not know what Jesus was up to, and were no doubt offended by his action. When the kingdom of the new comes into conflict with our own business as usual, however, neither do we find it any less scandalous.”ⁱⁱ

IV.

On Monday night, my dad and I joined a packed house at Lincoln University to see the premiere of the documentary “The Foot: A Community Remembered.” The film is about the rich culture and economy of Jefferson City’s historic district around Lincoln University and several blocks of Lafayette Street during the 19th and 20th centuries. The neighborhood was home to Black residents who faced harsh restrictions during the era of Jim Crow laws and segregation. The film sheds light on a part of our city’s treasured history through personal interviews and cherished stories from those who lived and worked in the Foot. You can view the documentary on Lincoln University’s [YouTube page](#), and I encourage you to do so.

As the film developed, it moved to the personal stories of those who experienced racism and segregation growing up in our city. As I sat in that darkened theatre, heart-broken by those painful stories from black men and women growing up in our community a few miles from our church, I began to get a knot in my stomach as I wondered, “Would our church be named in this film, and if so, what would it be named for?”

As they shared stories about fearing for their safety, about being warned not to step out of line or go to the wrong places, about walking single-file to the black Baptist church, I wondered about this white Baptist church that I love so deeply at the corner of Monroe and Capitol. Where were we in this community story? Did we protect business as usual? Were our members ones the Black community feared, or were we counted as friends? What about today? When the kingdom of the new comes into conflict with our own business as usual, we, too, find it scandalous.

In August 2019, we held a worship service here with Second Baptist Church, where we publicly lamented from this altar the ways our congregation participated in the past to the enslavement of black people. We acknowledged, through research gathered by church member Brian Kaylor, that four of our first seven pastors held people in slavery, along with eight charter members who were slave owners. We spoke aloud the names of those enslaved persons who were members whose names were known. We asked for forgiveness for protecting and participating in systems that oppressed others and were contrary to the ways of the kingdom of God. But that worship service doesn't mean God's work is over for us around racial injustice or other issues. This is a never-ending task. There are still more tables to be flipped, more business-as-usual to be challenged.

V.

Sometimes we need some holy havoc to wake us up. Some divine disorder. A key aspect of Lent is to look openly at those parts of our life where we have accepted “business as usual” and discern when we have fought against or resisted anything that challenges that. As individuals, we can become content and comfortable with our daily patterns of life. We are comfortable with people who look, think, behave, and vote like us, and we react when our comforts are challenged. As a church, we become comfortable worshipping the same way, conducting business the same way, and serving the same people we have always served. Yet many times, what God is calling us to do is throw out our old patterns of behavior and seek out what Jesus calls us to do in a new and transforming way.

What does Jesus need to overturn in our lives and church? What barriers and traditions have we constructed that are no longer serving the ways of the kingdom of God?

Is it our practice around what we wear on Sundays? Someone staying at the shelter for those unhoused recently told me he was hesitant to attend worship here because he didn't have any nice clothes. While that may be an expectation of his as much as ours, what might God call us to do for all people to feel welcome to worship God here, regardless of what they wear?

Is it the practice of holy huddles where we only sit and speak with those we know, leaving those brave enough to come through the doors for the first time to wonder why they ever gave another church another try?

Is it our expectations of behavior? Young parents nervous to bring their fussy, hyper, and loud children to worship because of side eyes and disapproving glances. Someone new to faith still struggling with habits formed long before they met Jesus that take time, genuine community, and unconditional love to break.

Is it the practice of how we use our space or spend our money? Are our resources, as a church and individuals, more dedicated to us, our agendas, and serving our needs, or do we see all resources as belonging to God and to the sharing and living of the Good News?

Is it our love and idolatry of a political party or politician or our hatred of a political party or politician that convinces us the means justify the end when neither the means nor the end is of the kingdom of God? A love and idolatry that builds barriers with those who might disagree with us, leaving no sacred space for curiosity, conversation, and community among those who might see things differently? The Gospel is only good news if it is good news for everybody. And man is that hard for us to swallow sometimes, especially in an election year.

Is it our own shame and feelings of unworthiness that keep us from fully embracing Jesus? At our college Bible study Wednesday night, we discussed this passage, and someone mentioned how it can be difficult to come to God when you know that you've not been living as God wants you to live. And I remarked that I think Jesus would throw the table selling shame and guilt, too. Jesus wants nothing, absolutely nothing, including our own shame and guilt, to keep us and others from God.

VI.

When Jesus entered the temple and turned it upside down, he was making a disruptive and radical statement about what was happening and who he was. No one should have the power to control God's presence and blessings to reach the children of God. No one should be prevented from the revelation of God because of money, traditions, or religious orders and systems. Jesus is zealous about this. He embodied this in his earthly ministry, breaking down the barriers that exclude anyone from God. His entire life, death, resurrection, and ascension are about making God's presence our home.

God does not dwell in a temple made of stone. The very temple in this story would be destroyed about 40 years later by Rome. In verse 21, Jesus speaks of a new temple, the temple of his body where the presence of God dwells. A few days after Jesus overturns the tables, Jesus' temple (his body) gets raised from destruction, from death. And then, his disciples remembered what Jesus had said that day in the court of the Gentiles, and they finally understood. Every velvet rope, every bouncer, every barrier, including sin and death, is forever defeated in Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we, too, as followers of Christ,

become the bodies and living temples where God dwells. This is the kingdom of the new. And it's wonderfully scandalous.

Jesus is still consumed with passion for God's house. Jesus loves us but loves the justice, truth, and holiness of God even more. With whip in hand, Jesus will drive out the lesser gods we love and serve. Jesus will cleanse us until we shine. Jesus will turn over every barrier and toss out every hindrance that gets in the way of us and others worshipping God. Will we let him? Or will we say who are you to overthrow our tables, Lord? And so, we pray: Table-turning Jesus, whip us into shape, clean us up, dust us off, until we worship you – in word and in deed - as we ought, living altared lives for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2663246-ai-art>

ⁱⁱ <https://crossings.org/text-study/third-sunday-in-lent-3/>