

April 17, 2011
Palm Sunday

Rev. John C. Minihan
John 2:13-22

THE PROBLEM WITH JESUS

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

My first job after college was as a youth director in a church near Cleveland working with high school, junior high and elementary age students.

Now, my duties were fairly typical for youth ministers at the time.

I ran youth groups and led Bible studies.

I coordinated retreats and planned mission trips and special events.

I even got to preach once-in-a-while. But, mostly my job was just ministering to the kids and their families – which was fine by me because at the tender age of 22, I wasn’t much more than a kid myself.

And, because I wanted to relate with the kids — and probably felt more comfortable with them anyway -- I usually made it a point to sit with them during worship over in back pews where they had staked out a little area for themselves.

But, as time went on, I began to notice that there wasn’t a whole lot of worshiping going on there in those back pews!

Instead, the kids spent that time mostly talking or reading – writing notes – or just going through their purses.

It was a different era back then, of course. If they had cell phones no doubt they’d have been texting and checking out their facebook accounts.

You get the picture!

But, it really bothered me!

Now, I'd like to say it bothered me because they weren't taking worship seriously and giving God His due. But, truthfully, I sorta felt like if the parents noticed they might think I wasn't doing my job.

So, I came up with a plan.

One Saturday before worship, I went into the sanctuary and "roped" off the back three pews where the kids usually sat.

Along with that, I stacked Bibles and hymnals in the pews so they simply couldn't lift the ropes and sit there anyway.

Then I waited for the kids to come in on Sunday morning and discover they actually had to sit with their parents and pay attention that day.

Well, everything went according to plan.

The kids saw the area I had roped off and ended up sitting with their families. And, all's well that ends well – I thought!

But, it wasn't more than a couple of days before I discovered that I'd opened up a big can of worms.

You see, the kids didn't like having their space taken away, of course – and complained to their parents...

Their parents complained to the Senior Pastor...

And, the Senior Pastor – who had no idea what I'd done – called me into his office to ask me what I'd done.

Now, I thought I had legitimate reasons for roping off those pews. After all, it was "his" sermons the kids weren't listening to.

But, very patiently he explained that, while my intentions might have been good, I had no authority to go around making those kinds of decisions myself.

It simply wasn't my call.

Now, I didn't want to hear that, of course.

But, he was right!

Truth was I was low man on the totem pole and had absolutely no authority to do what I'd done.

Well, the question of "authority" is really at the heart of our Gospel lesson this morning.

In essence, Jesus gets fed up by what He sees going on at the Temple and -- "cleans house!"

But, the real issue isn't what Jesus does...

Rather, it's the question of His "authority" to do it.

And, this question of Jesus' authority is one, I believe, most people would rather avoid. Because at the end of that question there's a tremendous claim being made on our lives.

Now, the setting comes near the Passover as Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for the feast.

And, the first thing we've got to figure out is how to reconcile the account here in John's Gospel with similar accounts we find in Mathew, Mark and Luke.

You see, Matthew, Mark and Luke – what're known as the Synoptic Gospels (Synoptic basically means "the same) – also tell of Jesus driving all the merchants from the Temple.

But, while in the Synoptics this event comes right *after* Palm Sunday – during the last week of Jesus' life – here in John we find it at the very *beginning* of Jesus' public ministry...

Pretty much as soon as He starts!

And, the issue is, “How we reconcile the two?”

Is John right? Did Jesus carry out this provocative act at the *start* of His ministry?

Or, are Matthew, Mark and Luke right? Did Jesus clear the Temple at the *end* of His ministry – right before His arrest and crucifixion?

Well, scholars go back and forth on the issue.

But, the reason this question’s important, is because we want to have full confidence in the Scriptures and know, without a doubt, that they give us an accurate portrayal of Jesus Christ.

So, what do we do with such seemingly irreconcilable accounts?

Well, the answer’s really very simple – I think.

Now, again noting that scholars are all over the place on this, I believe the most reasonable explanation is that John is actually writing thematically – and not always chronologically.

In other words, that Jesus’ confrontation with the merchants in the Temple likely did happen at the “end” of His ministry – like Matthew, Mark and Luke say. But the reason John has it early in his Gospel is because he’s grouping it with other events in Jesus’ life to make a theological point!

For example...

In the passage just before this one we find Jesus performing His first public miracle – or sign (as John puts it) – by changing the water into wine at Cana in Galilee.

And then, immediately after our passage, we find Jesus talking to Nicodemus about being born again.

And, what links all these passages together is what we might call a “Replacement Theme” that runs throughout John’s Gospel.

So, in the wedding story, the old water set aside for Jewish rituals and ceremonial washing is miraculously replaced by the new wine of gladness and grace.

A chapter later, Nicodemus learns that in order to be born again, flesh must give way to the Spirit!

And, here, the Temple – which served as the meeting place between God and men -- is replaced by Jesus Himself who becomes the Mediator of a New Covenant.

There's a lot of theology in there – I know.

But, John's not as interested in linear progression in as much as he's interested in you and I recognizing important themes develop as they relate to Jesus Christ.

And, the theme here is Jesus as the New Temple of God!

You see...

The Temple was the holiest place in all Israel.

It was, the Jews believed, the meeting place between God and men.

It was much more than a church – even the biggest mega-church we can imagine.

It was the center of their religious and national identity -- their very lives.

But, what we find in John – with its theological overtones – is that Jesus Himself is actually the True Temple of God!

Jesus Himself is the meeting place between God and all of humanity.

And, His statement about the Temple being destroyed and raised again in three days, invites us to look past the “building” to where reconciliation between God and man is actually taking place...

Which is on the cross in the person of Jesus Himself!

That's why Jesus has such a strong reaction when He sees the circus act the Temple had become!

It's because this Temple, which was supposed to have been a rallying point for the nations...

Had become little more than a place of cheap marketing and merchandise.

You might think of it this way...

Recently an area church opened an outreach ministry in one of the vacant stores at the Indian Mound Mall.

They call it the *Church In The Mall* and, as far as outreach goes, I think it's an interesting idea. Have church at the mall. Go where the people are! Meet them at the intersections of their lives.

Show them how God is real in their everyday lives.

And yet, at the same time, I think we've got to be careful, because in our effort to be relevant, we might just be losing the distinctiveness that actually makes us the Church.

For example...

While on vacation and searching for a church to worship at once, I went online and found someplace that looked interesting.

But, what was even more interesting is that the "second" thing that was listed on their website for visitors...

The "second" thing – mind you...

Was their coffee bar!

That's what they were advertising!

It wasn't Jesus!

It wasn't the invitation to a life of discipleship!

It wasn't an offer to consider what living in real Christian community is all about!

It was their coffee bar!

That seems to be a big thing nowadays for churches – coffee bars.

In fact, inasmuch as newer, more contemporary churches kinda poke fun at traditional churches for their pipe organs and three-point sermons, these new start-ups all seems to be cut out of the same cookie-cutter mold themselves.

An invitation to come as you are...

Grab a cup of coffee – at the coffee-bar...

Enjoy the band...

And, get real with God.

Now, nothing wrong with that, of course. And, you can certainly have a church inside the mall.

But, what happens when the mall begins to get inside the church?

When the Church begins to lose its distinctive flavor as the people of God?

Well, you see, that's one of the reasons Jesus loses His cool and begins turning everything upside down!

It wasn't just the cattle pens and the sheep stalls and all the money changing hands within the Temple Courts.

That was bad enough!

But, it was also how the people had abandoned their calling to be a banner for all nations and to point those nations to God!

And so, Jesus' outburst is an act of judgment against the corruption going on inside the Temple.

But, it's also a direct indictment against the Temple itself...

What it had become...

What it had failed to do!

Of course, all this naturally offended the Jewish religious leaders. They want to know by what authority Jesus does all this.

But, that's the thing about Jesus.

He is offensive.

No two ways about it. Jesus Christ is the most offensive man who ever lived!

And, the reason He's so offensive is because of the authority He claims...

And, the claim that authority makes on our lives!

You've probably seen it a million times.

Okay...

Maybe not a million, but I know you've seen it a lot because according to some estimates, it's been reproduced about 500 million times.

It's Warner Sallman's 1940 painting, *The Head of Christ*.

Do you know which one I mean?

It's the one where a honey-haired, blue-eyed Jesus stares serenely into the distance.

A faint glow forms the backdrop around His head. And, the soft lighting reveals near perfect features.

This painting is often hung in children's Sunday School rooms. And, it's easy to see why.

It's tranquil...

It's gentle...

It's comforting!

It's soothing!

You look at that painting and wonder how anyone could ever arrest someone like this – beat Him within an inch of His life – then nail Him to a cross.

It just doesn't make sense!

But, as one writer says: *“Sallman's painting illustrates how easily we domesticate the Deity, creating Jesus in our own image so that we can then co-opt Him for our own purposes.”*

But, this inoffensive Jesus, whose message of gentle and non-threatening love we so often cite, is the same One who goes rampaging through the Temple...

Who calls Himself the Light of the World...

The Bread of Life...

The Good Shepherd...

The True Vine...

He's the One who tells us we have to make a choice because He's the Way and the Truth and the Life – and that no one comes to the Father except through Him!

And, that's what people don't like!

This claim to authority...

And, the authority that claim makes on our lives!

Recently a movie came out called *Soul Surfer* – which is the true story of a teenage girl named Bethany Hamilton whose arm was bitten off by a shark when she was 14 years old.

At the time Bethany was one of the top young surfers in the world. And, of course, it seemed like that shark attack – which could've killed her – most certainly derailed any future ambitions of turning pro.

But, less than a month after the attack, Bethany was back in the water learning how to surf again with only one arm.

A year later she won a national surfing title.

And now, she's ranked 23rd in the world!

But, the most amazing thing about Bethany is her outspoken faith in Jesus Christ and how she and her family fought hard to make sure their faith was accurately portrayed in the film.

You see, apparently Bethany's faith caused a lot of debate while the film was being shot.

***"To get anything in the film was a battle,"* says Bethany's youth-group leader.**

For example...

Producers didn't want to include a scene showing Bethany's youth-group leader reading Jeremiah 29:11 to her – *"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

They also didn't want a scene of Bethany's dad reading from Philippians 4:13, where it says, *"I can do all things through Him who gives me strength."*

And, they were really adamant about not mentioning the name of “Jesus” in the film – although apparently they relented somewhat and it appears twice.

But, the question is, “Why?”

Why are folks so against Jesus?

The real Jesus?

Again, it’s a question of authority.

You see, if Jesus is Who He says He is then we’ve got to listen to Him!

If Jesus truly is the New Temple – the meeting place between God and all of humanity – then our response to Him matters!

I mean, it’s no coincidence that in so many places in the world today you can get by with generic references to God.

But, mention Jesus – then all “you-know-what” breaks loose!

It’s because Jesus matters!

You see, what we’ve got to understand is that all roads don’t lead to Heaven...

There’s not one truth for you and another for me...

And, that God’s greatest desire is for us isn’t just to be nice to one another and be happy.

Rather, God’s desire for us is to be holy.

And, holiness is found through Jesus Christ -- alone!

About five years ago, author and church researcher, Ed Stetzer recalls being in Chicago for an interfaith meeting.

Representatives from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Baha`i and Orthodox churches were all gathered to share information about congregational research and then compare their findings.

“I was unsure whether I belonged at the meeting,” Stetzer says.

“In one session, the facilitator explained that the research should lead to cooperative resourcing to help all of our congregations. He suggested that we could jointly create, publish, and distribute resources to help congregations in faith development and growth.”

Stetzer adds, *“At the appropriate time, and with my best smile, I raised my hand and said something like this: ‘I do appreciate the funding that allows us to survey our churches, and I think it is helpful to use similar questions and metrics for better research.’”*

“But I am not here to form a partnership to help one another. I want to help the churches I serve, and part of the reason they exist is to convert some of you.”

Well, Stetzer says he paused – smiled – and worked hard not to sound menacing. But, some participants in the room looked at him as if he’d just uttered a string of profanities.

Now, the funny thing is that Stetzer says it wasn’t the Muslim next to him who was shocked. In fact, he said the Muslim felt the same way – that is was his duty to convert others to the way he believed..

Stetzer implies that it was largely the liberal Protestants...

The “quote – unquote” Christians who couldn’t believe what he was saying.

That he’d have the audacity to actually claim Jesus is the One and Only Way!

Well, here’s the question I have for you today...

Are you as clear on that point yourselves?

And, do you understand the authority Jesus claims and the claim that authority makes on your life?

You see, the problem with Jesus is that He doesn't offer multiple choices.

He just offers you Himself and the sign of His Resurrection to lead you to faith and save you.

In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, The Witch, And The Wardrobe*, there's a wonderful scene in which Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter are in Narnia and Mr. Beaver is telling them about Aslan.

Aslan – of course – is the Christ-figure in Lewis' story.

They learn that Aslan is the true King of Narnia – the Son of the Emperor-Beyond-The Sea. And, when they hear that Aslan's a lion and not a man, Susan asks, *"Is he -- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."*

Mr. Beaver replies, *"If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just quite silly."*

Then Lucy says, *"Then he isn't safe?"*

To which Mr. Beaver replies, *"Who said anything about safe?"*

"Course he's not safe. But he's good."

"He's the King, I tell you."

Well, the problem with Jesus is He's not safe either.

He's not safe. But, He's good!

He's the King, I tell you!

And, on this Palm Sunday we can either welcome Jesus into our lives – remembering Who He is and What He came to do on the cross...

And, what that means for our lives.

Or, we can watch Him ride on by and keep pretending we can come to God on our terms...

And, not His own.

But, Jesus was absolutely clear about “who” He is and “why” He came.

The question today is – “How clear are you?”

Amen.