

You may not have thought about it. But churches have to get their stuff from somewhere. And in churches like ours church where we have ancient liturgical forms of worship, we need a certain amount of stuff.

And so, there are catalogues for churches. You can buy just about anything you need, and lots of stuff you don't need. Everything from furniture to things made of fabric. Vestments. Clergy shirts. Communion sets. It's all here. In a market economy like ours, this is how things work.

So why is Jesus so upset by a little commerce going on in the Temple? Surely a little buying and selling is necessary to facilitate the worship in a very large and complex Temple.

To a certain degree some buying and selling was necessary in the Jerusalem Temple. But things had gotten out of hand. Two particular things had gotten derailed. And Jesus is not happy with the situation.

One is the money changing. The other is the sale of unblemished animals for sacrifice.

In theory, both the sale of animals and changing of money were necessary for the proper operation of the temple. Yet in practice, both activities had become corrupted.

Money changing.

Coins of the Roman empire featured pictures of Caesar on the front, who was regarded as a god. And they often had other gods on the reverse. Jews felt that Roman coins with pictures of Roman gods were a violation of the Second Commandment: You shall not make for yourself any graven image. In other words, it was idolatry. So, when worshipers came to the temple, they would exchange their outside pagan coins for special temple coins which did not bear Caesar's image.

The only problem was, the money changers found that they had a monopoly, a concession. Eventually they started charging a pretty hefty exchange fee, perhaps about 10%.

It'd be like setting up a table at the door of the church and saying, "You can't bring any money in here with a picture of a president on it. You can only use special church money. And we're only going charge you a 10% commission as we exchange it for you." You can see how that could get out of hand.

Also, in addition to the money changing, animals were being sold in the Temple. Animals were necessary for Jewish worship. No animal, no sacrifice, no temple. But only priests could certify whether or not animals were perfect enough to be sacrificed. Eventually, instead of just inspecting the animals that others brought in, they started selling their own animals, at a substantial profit. "Sorry, your lamb isn't quite good enough. But lucky for you, here's a lamb we can let you have for a bargain price."

It would be roughly akin to us setting up tables at our doors as you're coming in. Here's a table where you can purchase bread to be used for communion. Here's a table where you can purchase the wine. Here's another table where we'll sell you a bulletin. Here's another table where you can rent a hymnal. Pay before you pray.

Both the money changing and the sale of animals in the temple came in theory from pure motives. In reality, both became money making monopolies, and both became ways of lightening the purses of the masses of worshipers that came to the temple. By some estimates, the Temple was probably making a profit equivalent to about a quarter-billion of our dollars every year. A \$250,000,000 annual profit made the Temple pretty lucrative.

This sets up the scene from our Gospel lesson. Jesus passes judgment on this religious profiteering.

Jesus comes to the temple. He finds people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

That's the normal situation at the Temple. People have gotten used to it. But Jesus reacts very strongly to this situation: He makes a whip of cords...

Jesus with a whip is not our usual bland Sunday school image. But John is clear. Jesus makes a whip of cords. He drives out the sellers and the animals. He also dumps the coins of the moneychangers and knocks over their tables.

Jesus reacts strongly to the way things have become corrupted. He reacts with righteous indignation. He says, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

The original purpose of worshipping God has been obscured by the drive to make a profit. The religious leaders should have been leading their people in worship. Instead, they have been fleecing the flock. And the Good Shepherd comes to set things straight.

The worship of God is not about buying and selling. For that matter, the worship of God is not about external forms. In fact, Jesus says, the worship of God is of a different order all together.

The Jewish leaders ask Jesus, "What sign can you show us? What's your authority?"

Jesus replies, "Destroy this temple, and in 3 days I will raise it up."

The Jewish leaders scoff. They're taking him literally. It's taken more than 46 years to build the Temple. To destroy it and rebuild it in 3 days? Jesus must be mad.

Yet, they've missed the point. John points out that Jesus is not talking about a temple made of stone.

Jesus is talking about replacing the old temple with a new one: his own body. No longer will people need to come to Jerusalem to sacrifice sheep or pigeons or oxen in order to have relationship with God.

Instead, they only need to come to Jesus. John's message is that Jesus is replacing sacrificial worship in the Temple through his own sacrificial action on the cross. The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world replaces for all time the practice of animal sacrifice.

Jesus himself is the Temple of God's presence. Jesus' body is the Word made flesh, God with us.

We don't have to go to a temple. We only have to go to Jesus. And he's closer than we usually think.

And what's more, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus makes other temples for God as well. Temples in the hearts of his followers.

As Paul says, "you are God's temple and... God's Spirit dwells in you."

To find God, believers have to look no farther than in their hearts.

But so often, there are other things in our hearts, other desires, other clutter that pushes God out.

And if that's the case, then we need to take a close look at our temples. I don't know about you, but my heart is almost always in need of Spring Cleaning.

Sometimes this isn't a very pleasant prospect. I don't want to have my tables turned over. I don't want to have the things I cling to suddenly driven out. I don't want to be whipped into shape. Yet, often, this is precisely what we need most.

The challenge posed in our Gospel lesson is this. Can you allow Jesus to come into your Temple and clean it up? Can you allow Jesus into your heart to get rid of those things you need to get rid of? Can you allow Jesus to make changes in the dead end and destructive patterns in your life? Can you allow Jesus to get you back on track when you've gone astray? Can you let Jesus in to drive out those things that you have bought into, or which you've sold out to?"

The challenge for all of us is allowing Jesus in to clean us up.

Lord, come and cleanse me. Come into my heart. Drive away those things that distract me. And help me to better serve you.