

Sermon, March 8, 2015 - Lent 3

“Zeal for Your House will Consume Me”

John 2:13–22 (23–25)



Dear Friends in Christ!

The Small Catechisms teaches us that there are two kinds of actual sins, that is the sins we commit daily: One is the sin of commission and the other the sin of omission. Sins of commission are the things we do, like killing or swearing, but sins of omission are the things we don't do as we are supposed to do.

And in the Gospel reading for today of John chapter 2, we see both of those sins being committed and by and large several commandments are being broken, in God's Temple in Jerusalem.

And, the same is happening in our times, only in the temple of stones and bricks but in the temple of our hearts and God's church. We are guilty of sins of commission and sins of omission. Let's consider all this for the next few minutes.

Jesus as a faithful Jew comes to the Temple at Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration, as required.

But, when he went to the temple, he was disgusted by what he found. The temple courtyard had been turned into a marketplace! Merchants had set up shops selling pigeons, oxen, and sheep to the faithful who had come to Jerusalem from far-off lands. Money-changers were also there, changing foreign currency into local money, again, so the faithful could pay the temple tax of one-half shekel.

Now, to have these things available to the foreign worshipers wasn't bad, because worship of the Lord demanded the people bring sacrifices in proportion to their wealth. And it was totally impractical—if not impossible—for someone who had come a long distance to bring his own sacrificial animal. There needed to be some way for those things to be acquired in Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, God had even given instructions for this kind of arrangement. So, that wasn't the problem!

The problem was that the sellers had set up shop right in the temple itself, in what is known as the court of the Gentiles and that turned it into a stinking spectacle that created two other horrific problems:

First: The worshipers, as they passed through the courtyard on their way into the temple, were probably more focused on bargaining over the cost of the animals or bickering about the exchange rate for their foreign money than they were on singing entrance psalms and preparing their hearts for worship of the Lord Most High! What a disgrace! No problem recognizing how guilty everyone involved in all this trading was these are the sins of commission.

And the second: by setting up shop in the court of Gentiles, a huge obstacle was put in the way for gentiles to properly worship in the temple, by their attitude and by putting their shop right there in that place, they were preventing the gentiles to come for worship and to be saved. Now, this was the sin of omission.

What about us today? We are not like those people who set up shop in the Gentiles Courts, are we? God forbid we are. In fact we want to have access to God without any stumbling block, right? I think we do and that's a good thing. But...

There are things that we too have done and are doing that resemble what was at the heart of those people at the Temple. And if we don't change our ways we will be treated in the same way Jesus treated those people at the temple, or worse be condemned for eternity.

Jesus said "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

We too, have setup shop in the "Gentiles Courts" by making church something about us and not about God. We too have hindered others to come to God and be saved and in turn also worship God.

Let me explain: For the last 20 year our churches have experienced a sharp decline in membership and the numbers in attendance in Worship. Here at Faith we have experienced our share in the experience and most certainly in the last couple of years. But the question is, why and who is to blame? Leaders? Pastors? Our present times, society? God? Who really is to blame for our decline?

As a pastor I do confess that in some ways we pastors are to blame, or at least the blame falls on us. Even when we are hard at work, and even when circumstances do not fall on the pastor's shoulder, in the end it seems that we are to be blamed. At least that's what I feel, and certainly been feeling in the last while. But is it only the pastor to blame? Do we as church members have a role in all of it?

By and large we all have a part in it that gradually has lead us to this point and that dear friends, falls under the third commandment. In various ways: First, the way we have treated Church, God's gifts of his Word and the Sacraments. Second, the way we have instilled the importance and value of church in our children and the next generation. And third, the unfulfillment of our wants.

All of which if we look closely, are related to what the people who have setup business in the Temple courts have in common, that is consumerism, with all its consequences.

Some might argue that it is not consumerism, but at the heart of consumerism is what we want, and in the end we do what we want. And for what we want we do spend a considerable amount of time exploring, exploiting and sort of indulging, but usually at the price of faith and the shrinking of our church at the present time.

Consumerism is what keeps us away from Church, first we see it in those who have to work. Now work is not bad! We do have to work to put bread on the table and cover our bills. Even the people at the temple can agree with us that another reason for them to be there was not only to provide services to pilgrims coming to worship at the Temple but for reasons of family economics, they need to eat. The problem is that if that is all we do we lose focus of what church is. Many do work on Sunday on a second job even, well because they need the money.

Next if we have the money, well let's enjoy it! And let's do it on Sundays. Now instead of going to church on Sundays we chose to pursue recreation and the enjoyment of our toys, toys that are not cheap by the way and enjoy them at the expense of church attendance.

Now when we skip church on Sunday because of whatever reason and don't find or create a replacement worship to attend, instills in our children the message Church is not important. We instill in our guests by our absence the message that Church is not important. We don't have to say it, we just show it! There is our sin of omission! No

wonder why our children leave church after confirmation, no wonder those who are baptized are not in church constantly, faithfully and committed, no wonder why we don't have enough leaders for today. We have shortcut our own future. And more, we fail at knowing who we really are and what we are about.

And lastly, consumerism creates and satisfies our wants, but never satisfies our needs. And it is not only in material things but we do translate the same attitude to our faith and emotional life.

At church we have experienced conflicts, in fact several of them, at congregational and personal levels. Most of our conflicts happened, not so much because of doctrine and staying close to scriptural basis but because of personal preferences. Now conflicts are sometimes necessary and healthy, the problem is that when we don't get our way we run away without a proper conflict resolution process, where understanding and certainly forgiveness will reign, just as God has forgiven us, just as Jesus has put an end to enmity between us and God. When we don't get our way but instead make a fuss about it and throw a tantrum, we tell our children and others, God's forgiveness and God's purpose for the church don't count and not enough for us to live peacefully and in brotherhood in the communion of God's Church.

Now, yes there other reasons, many others in fact, that have contributed to the declining of our churches, not only our congregation but the church at large, in fact throughout the world, which we need to explore as well.

But for our sake today in light of our sins of commission and omission, let's allow Jesus to help us and that He would not treat us as he treated those people at the Temple, but instead lets us say with Jesus: "Zeal for your house will consume me!"

Jesus, incorrectly thought by some to be weak and soft—well, Jesus shows himself to be a man of strength and action. He took cords and, using them as a whip, drove the animals and merchants out of the temple, thus fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah would have "zeal" for the house of God (Ps 69:9). And as he did, none, not one of the merchants even dared to stand up to him!

There's no doubt this smelly spectacle of sweaty people and droves of animals being sold right within the house of the Lord was bad, but Jesus was seeing something else, deeper than just the temple courts. The Gospel tells us that He looked into people's hearts. He saw through their duplicity, their hiding behind God's instructions in order to make a fast buck. As bad as the scene and the smell had to be, the spiritual stench of the place—lust for money at God's expense—was worse!

Yes! They were—sinners through and through, more interested in making a few shekels than in honoring the Lord's house.

Now, if he knows the hearts of the money-changers and animal merchants, he knows your heart as well!

He sees your real attitude toward the Ten Commandments! Although you might not be caught bowing down to a "carved image," he sees your attitude toward the myriad of other things you allow to be foremost in your life—your work, your money, your family, your sports, your vacation, your wants. He sees your attitude toward sins of the flesh, toward other people's property, toward speaking well of your neighbor. He sees how we have treated God's House, worship, His word and the Sacraments. He sees the lack of zeal for God's house!

Oh, yes, he sees it all! Let's admit it: we—just like the temple merchants—we are like those people at the Temple rightly deserving to have Jesus take a whip and drive us out of his presence forever!

A commentator described why Jesus had to rid the temple of those people, he writes: "The uncleanness in the temple portrayed the corruption of the people and was an image of the impurity in their hearts. The conditions existing in the temple are therefore a testimony against the people. [Jesus'] blows [with the whip] struck at their hearts. And the cleansing is a picture of what must occur with the people to make it a holy nation acceptable to God. And what is more, this must be made to apply to the individual. The house of the heart must be cleansed if it is to be the temple of God" (Ylvisaker, 138–39).

Dear people of God, we, too, have a "spiritual stench," and it's far worse than the largest holding pen of sheep and oxen in a closed-up barn on a hot, humid summer day!

During this holy season of Lent, our Lord calls us to recognize our utter need for cleansing of our hearts laden with sin. He calls us to allow his right and just Law to show us our sins and then in repentance and faith to receive him as he reaches out to us—to you—with his love and mercy.

He urgently desires to cleanse "the house of [your] heart," to wash it pure with the only cleaning agent that will get the "stench" out—his holy, precious blood shed for you and the whole world!

In fact he already did it on Good Friday on Mt. Calvary. "Zeal" for his Father's house drove him to cleanse the temple that fateful day, and "zeal" for you—zeal motivated by his eternal love—drove him to the cross to cleanse you, so that you could be a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19)—your body and soul washed clean and pure, thereby making you to be a righteous one of his forever!

You're now one of his very own, a forgiven child of his.

Rather than chasing you out of his eternal presence with a whip, he eagerly walks toward you, always seeking to embrace you, inviting you to dine at his Table, regularly here on earth and eternally with him in heaven!

I realized that this sermon was preached to the Choir so to speak. Yet not so, but those who needed to hear this sermon are probably not here today. But on the account of the Gospel reading I'm calling on all Lutherans, I'm calling all of you to help spread this message and those who have been trapped by consumerism to stand up, to wake up, to be true to their vocation and their baptismal calling. I'm calling on all the confirmed members of the church to come back and not sleep any more you need God, we need you. There is lots that needs to be done. You are today's church, you have been redeemed by Jesus blood on the Cross of Calvary, do not make a mockery of your salvation, but instead as God has shown you and called you He wants to use you, he wants to do great things through you. Today is the day, now is the time! Today is the day to have the same zeal Jesus had for his Temple back then, and you his temple for today!

On this day, led by the Spirit of Christ, vow that you'll allow the house of your heart to be—and remain—cleansed, that it will forever be a temple of God!

Amen.