

Lent 3B: John 2:13-22  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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The Rev. W. Terry Miller

### **The Business of Religion**

Richard Halverson, the long-time chaplain to the US Senate, characterized the spread of the Christianity this way: “When the Greeks got the gospel, they turned it into a philosophy; when the Romans got it, they turned it into a government; when the Europeans got it, they turned it into a culture; and when the Americans got it, they turned it into a business.” Looking at the Ted Haggards, Jimmy Swaggarts, and Joel Osteens of our country, we have to admit there may be something to that assessment. Yet it is not exactly fair to say that Americans are the first to make a business of religion. As we just heard in our Gospel lesson, the Jews of Jesus’ day were guilty of that very thing.

According to John, at the start of Jesus’ ministry, right after his water-into-wine miracle in Cana, Jesus and his disciples take a trip to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple, you know, was the center of national life for the Jews and the focus of the Jewish religion. For, the Temple was where the Lord dwelled, where God was most present on earth. And Jews from all over Judea, Galilee and the wider Mediterranean would make pilgrimages there for religious festivals, to offer sacrifices to God, in thanksgiving and to atone for their sins. Jesus and his crew arrive at the Temple for just such a festival, for Passover. The Temple complex would have been abuzz, with preparations being made for all visitors that would soon come to make their sacrifices. It’d be like a cathedral just before Easter when everyone from the altar guild to the custodians to the clergy would be busy getting the church ready for the holy day crowd. Except that in this case, what Jesus sees aren’t a church’s reverent preparations but instead something more like a livestock auction or a flea market: animals everywhere—cows and sheep and doves—and gangs of money changers all clamoring for attention.

Now, the presence of the animals and money changers makes some sense. I mean, think about it—you’re a pilgrim coming from some place far away from Jerusalem—Alexandria in Egypt, Syria, Rome or just neighboring Galilee. Are you going to drag a cow or a sheep or even a bird cage all that way to make a sacrifice? No, it’s much easier to just buy the cow or sheep to sacrifice once you get there. And so you had livestock dealers to provide that service. Oh, but there’s another problem—the money you brought isn’t money you can use in the Temple. You couldn’t put it in the offering plate or even use it to pay the Temple tax to help those in need. Because the coin you most likely had was a denarius, a silver coin minted by Romans that had the emperor’s head and the phrase “Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus” inscribed on it. Such a coin was itself blasphemous, idolatrous. And so it had to be exchanged for some other currency. Which is where the money changers came in—they exchanged the blasphemous denarius for the acceptable Jewish shekel. And if the money changers charged a fee for the service, well, that’s to be expected. They have to make a living too. And if they happen to work a little too closely with the sacrifice-sellers, even occasionally loaning them money at interest (a no-no for Jews), well, what are you to do? Everyone agreed they provided an important, essential service.

Everyone, that is, besides Jesus. To Jesus, the money changers and livestock dealers had made this place of worship into a place of wheeling-and-dealing. And if there is one thing that turned the usually mild-mannered, turn-the-other-cheek Messiah into a raging force, it's the perversion of religion. And so, Jesus sees how animals and money changers had taken over the Temple courts and he just goes off. "Get these things out of here! This is my Father's house, not a marketplace," Jesus exclaims, as he knocks over the stalls and overturns their tables, spilling coins all over the place and driving everyone out.

Now, it needs to be said that it was not the buying of animals for the sacrifice or the business of the money changers, *pe se*, that got Jesus so upset. Scholars have noted that earlier practice had these two services located farther away, across the Kidron Valley on the Mount of Olives. But now these vendors had been allowed to come into the sacred precincts of the Temple. The problem then wasn't that the business was illegitimate, it was that it was going on in an illegitimate place, *within the Temple*. And so even though they were brought in to facilitate worship, they were now getting in the way of worship, crowding out communion with commerce.

Now, to be fair, the Temple market is just an example of a problem religions perennially face—the original faith being lost, as traditions and customs and folk practices get added on over time. Most are begun for good and legitimate reasons, but they end up covering over the pure and simple faith, like so many layers of paint on antique furniture. This was what was at issue during the Protestant Reformation. By the late Middle Ages, there was such a buildup, so many excesses of piety that had been indulged—praying to Mary, revering the relics of saints, giving the Pope kingly powers, and of course the selling of papal indulgences, virtual get-out-of-hell-free cards—so egregious were these that the true faith wasn't just obscured but was in danger of being supplanted, replaced. And so Luther, Calvin, Cranmer and the other Reformers sought to get back to the purer faith, "the old time religion," by stripping the Church of the accretions, the buildup, like you would strip a table to get back to the natural wood underneath.

That's not unlike what Jesus is aiming at here. He is not saying that the Jewish religion, with its Temple worship and animal sacrifices, is all wrong or illegitimate; he is seeking rather to have it cleansed, purified, to get back to the true "business of religion," which is worship, coming before the Lord, being present to Him.

This makes me think that what is at issue with the Temple market isn't so much the commercial transactions going on there as much as the *transactional religion* they encouraged, the attitude that sees religion as something you do to get things from God. I'm talking about the belief that if we pray, we come to church, and we give (make our sacrifices), then God will then give us good things, like protection, prosperity and progeny, children. Only, religion isn't supposed to be *transactional*. It's supposed to be *transformational*. For, what else do we think happens when we come into the courts of heaven, into the presence of the Holy One, the Almighty—what do we expect will happen, but that we will be transformed, changed by the encounter? I think that's why a lot of us—Jews and Christians alike—prefer the transactional approach: it's safer, it keeps God at a distance. I mean, let's face it, being up close and personal with God can be scary—there's no telling what will happen, how differently we will be coming away from the encounter.

Here we see why all the additions, the accretions that get gunked onto the faith, are such a problem—they get in the way, they get between us and God, they prevent us from meeting our Father in heaven. Just as the livestock dealers and money changers crowded out the Temple courts, often the things we think of as part of our religion actually get in the way of our being present to God.

Thinking this way, it's easy to point fingers at megachurches and the crazy variety of programs they offer—everything from Bible studies to health clinics and job fairs, from 12-step type groups to auto repair clinics and day care centers. Some have their own roller rinks, pools, gymnasiums, racquetball courts, weight rooms, and movie theaters—something for everyone! Question is, do all these programs *really* deepen members' faith, or do they actually encourage a false sense of holiness that keeps them from experiencing God? It is that they make participants better Christians? Or do they insulate them, protect them from non-believers and also from God?

Of course, megachurches aren't the only ones who are confused about what church is for. We have leaders in our own denomination who act as if the church exists to maintain a pretty building, or to advocate for political change, or to manage an endowment, or to be a chaplain to the liberal, democratic project, to make it work. It's not that any of these things are necessarily bad, but they can easily crowd out the chief business of the church—which is to worship God, to enjoy time in His presence, and invite others to join us in that.

I remember a story I read some time ago about a lifeguard station. On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and, with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their life and money and effort for the support of the work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided for the rescued. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Before long, the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decoration, and there was a replica lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick and some of them had dark skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could start their own lifesaving station down the coast. And so they did.

But as the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and so yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself. Today, if you visit that coast, you'll find a number of exclusive clubs all along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, only now most of the people drown.

As this story—this *parable*—suggests, God's people continually face the danger, the temptation of getting sidetracked from our lifesaving mission. We fail to “keep the main thing the main thing.” We let second-order and third-order activities become our focus. We love the things we get from God more than we love God.

If we are to prevent this from happening, we must be vigilant and uncompromising. We must be willing to scrutinize ourselves, to be honest about the things in our life that get in the way of our relationship with God, to clean house when we need to. That is precisely what Lent is for. Lent is just such a clearing season, a time of spring cleaning, a time when we are asked to go through the “courts” of our lives and listen when Jesus tells us to “get these things out of here.”

For God wants nothing to get in the way of our coming to him, or his coming to us. Indeed, it was for this reason that God sent his Son to us—so that we would no longer need to go to one location, the Temple, to encounter God, but so that all might meet him in Jesus, no matter where they are. For that, for him, we say, Thanks be to God!