

## **Into the Landscape: The Marketplace**

*A sermon preached on John 2:13-22 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on March 4, 2018*

Twice this week, I sat a few blocks up the street on Trade with some of the best and brightest communications strategists our city has to offer. The first was a planning lunch with our new co-chairs of the church's Outreach Ministry Team, two of our own with extensive experience in advertising and media management but most importantly, a love for and belief in our church as a force for Love in Winston-Salem. The second was a strategy session with a local values-driven communications agency who is assisting our church by developing tools to help us tell the story about how God is at work in our midst. Both meetings invited me to consider some deep and abiding questions about ministry in this day and age: *who* are we, First Baptist Church on Fifth, and *who* are we trying to reach? *Why* are we here? *What* do we want to say? And *how* do we differentiate ourselves within the marketplace of other churches and communities around us?

With new language around our church's mission, vision, values, and priorities hot off the press, language that you just wholeheartedly affirmed this morning, I was able to answer a number of these questions quickly and easily. But knowing I would be preaching about Jesus's angry activity in the temple today gave me pause.

Today's story of Jesus raging against the money lenders in the temple is one of just a few stories that we find in all four gospel accounts. Where Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this story near the end of Jesus's life, arranging it within the chronology of his final week of life so as to heighten

the rationale for his arrest and sentence, the writer of John instead tells it right at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. It's clear that John was more interested in the theological significance of this moment in Jesus's life, far more than the chronological precision of when it happened.<sup>1</sup> It's significant, of course, because we are only in chapter two of John's gospel. Meaning — we've only just met Jesus. Thus far in the fourth gospel, we've learned that Jesus is the Word made flesh, filled with God's glory even as he moved into the neighborhood of humanity, full of grace and truth. We've seen him revealing God to John the Baptist, calling Simon and Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel into lives of discipleship, and performing his first miracle at a wedding in Cana — a sign of abundance where wine overflowed and all were amazed.

But this is the first time the public encounters Jesus, at the Temple of all places, where he came alongside other observant Jews for the celebration of Passover. You can just imagine the scene when he arrived. The faithful came by the thousands, their long journeys culminating in the holiest of places — the temple, the place where God was uniquely found and mediated. But no matter who you were, you couldn't just walk into the temple. Rather, you had to first pay your temple tax, a fee assessed on all believers for the upkeep of the house and grounds. And that tax certainly couldn't be paid with Roman coins or Greek coins, those that bore the hated image of Caesar, so money changers were there to exchange the currency of empire for the shekels of the sacred, but for a fee. Then were you to want to offer a gift to God during this high and holy season of Passover — perhaps an animal

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph D. Small, "John 2:13-22," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p92, 94.

sacrifice, as was the custom — such animals could not bear any blemish. And who among the travelers could have managed to go all the way to Jerusalem with a flawless animal? Hardly a one, which opened up a market to sell animals right there at the temple... but for a fee.<sup>2</sup>

Into that marketplace storms Jesus, filled with the fire of righteous anger without any reservation to call a spade a spade, demanding to the money changers and animal sellers and commodifiers of access to God that they get out and cease exploiting the temple and turning it into a marketplace of buyers and sellers. When the people demanded a sign — some form that would acknowledge the authority upon which Jesus was acting — he said this: “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The writer of John editorializes this by saying: “but he was speaking of the temple of his body.” In other words, the temple and all its systems of fees and proper coins and perfect animals was now obsolete. No longer would it be the only place to encounter God. No longer must the practice of faith unwittingly become a marketplace for buying and selling. No longer does it have to be the way it’s always been, for Jesus makes a new way. And that new way will throughout this gospel explain the Word made flesh, the one who says “I am the vine, I am the bread of life, I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

And yet, more than two thousand years later, not a one of us fills the walls and halls of churches and sanctuaries today, free of the stain of the marketplace, for it is the pervasive reality of the culture in which we live. Knowingly or not, on either side of this pulpit, we all come to church as

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<sup>2</sup> Wonderful explanation of the first-century temple practices from Nibs Stroupe, “John 2:13-25,” *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, vol. 1, p. 53. I’m most partial to the commentary from William E. Hull’s *John* from *The Broadman’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 9, p.234-235.

consumers, seeking that one answer or even the right question that will be for us the silver bullet to make it all right. We come as shoppers, looking for things to make our life easier, happier, more meaningful or purposeful. We come as those marketed to, told every day by the world around us that we are never enough and bringing that baggage in with us to worship. We come as those looking for a church to meet all our needs, assuming that such a church exists and we only must find it or create it. We come as those trying to market the mystery of God, to make tangible and digestible the ineffable beauty of God at work in beloved community.

And when our confession is co-opted by commerce, I wonder what God in Christ might need to stir up among us.<sup>3</sup> In this season as our church asks important questions — who are we, why are we here, *what* do we want to say, how is it different — I wonder how Jesus might disrupt our answers. And in this Lenten season where we regularly enter the marketplaces of our world and resist the urge to bring such marketplaces in here, I wonder what Jesus might overturn in our own lives, what 21st century fees and animals he might have us abandon. “What sign will you give us,” we ask — wondering how it might implicate the humble temples of our own construction.

The liturgical irony was not lost on me, when several months ago, I discovered that today’s text from the Gospel of John was to be the basis of my first of four sermons to promote our capital campaign to enable a bold and faithful work to be done right here on Fifth Street. Nothing like the image of money changers in the Temple to kick off a fundraising effort in the church, am I right? The liturgical irony shifts though, as our timeline has, but

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<sup>3</sup> My take on a great line from Raquel St. Clair Lettsome, “John 2:13-25,” *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, p52.

holds nonetheless, as today we honor the twenty-year ministry of the best, our David Williamson, who has given his life in service of Christ's church, faithfully tending the church house and organizing our common life together around the worship of God therein.

As Christlike as he is, David had to promise me that he wouldn't come into worship today brandishing a whip of cords and turning over the communion table. But he understands as Jesus did — that no efforts on the part of a congregation to give shape and place and melody to the nudging of God for such a time as this should ever hinder the fresh wind of the Spirit that moves us ever more towards God and one another. David knows and has led in such a way, reminding us for two decades that no building, no worship style, no ministry, no program should ever become the foundation upon which a church is built. Rather, we are built on the firm foundation of Christ. It is not a message easily marketed and sold — by a church or for a Christian. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” Paul says, “but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.”

Brothers and sisters, might we allow ourselves to be disrupted by Christ who stirs up our old ways and means. Might we speak clearly the message of the cross, the good news that always transforms the marketplaces of our world. Might we sing anew the songs of faith, trusting that the song of Love will emerge. And might we welcome the change that Jesus brings, change that can be as nourishing as the bread and cup from which we now partake.

