



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
March 3, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Temple Trouble"

John 2:13-22 (NRSV)

2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

2:14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

2:15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

2:16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

2:17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

2:18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

2:20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

2:21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

2:22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

“Temple Trouble”

Decent and in order.

Paul tells the Corinthians,

“all things should be done decently and in order.”

If anything, Presbyterians are decent and orderly folks.

I’ve tried my best to memorize all the committees of the church. Let’s see if I can do it without my notes. There are nine of them:

Property
 Finance
 HR
 Environmental
 Mission
 Formation
 Stewardship
 Fellowship
 Connect

Did I get them all?

Who has ever served on a committee or Session at Westminster Presbyterian Church?

Raise your hand?

Keep them up.

Mary Boyd, chair of the Presbytery’s nominating committee, is currently writing down the name of everyone who isn’t raising their hand right now.

We’re even more organized than that. We are Presbyterian, that means we belong to the Presbytery. And as we’ve already indicated, every Presbytery has its own series of committees.

Gradye serves on the Committee on Ministry.

Barbara serves on the Equip Committee.

I was just nominated to serve on the Committee for the Preparation of Ministry.

That is the committee that guides prospective pastors through the long and arduous task of ordination in our denomination.

A funny story about the Committee for the Preparation of Ministry. When I went through the process, I took a very, very long time. If you do it quickly, you can get through ordination in about 2 years. For a number of reasons that I won't go into right now, I took 7 years.

At the end of those 7 years, I was living in North Carolina. I drove up to New Jersey, because that was where I had started the ordination process so many long years ago. I preached my final sermon before the Committee for the Preparation of Ministry. It was supposed to be this big, triumphant moment. The end of a very long journey, and the start of a new one.

I gave my sermon. Now, I've been preaching for a number of years. But I was brand new to preaching at that point. In retrospect, was it my best sermon? Did it move mountains? No.

But I thought it was passable.

The very first thing out of one of the members of that committee's mouth, after I finished my sermon was this:

“Well, that's the worst sermon I think I've ever heard.”

And he actually meant it. I mean, who says that?

By the way, I didn't tell that story to the PNC, the committee at Westminster that hired me eight months ago. We can talk after. We can talk after, if we need to.

That committee in New Jersey passed me anyway, if you're wondering. I think that man might have just been having a rough day. *Thank God* for the discernment of the *whole community*.

- Decently and in order.

We like to do things decently and in order.

The Temple did things decently and in order in Jesus's day. When you came to Jerusalem for Passover, you likely had traveled a long distance on foot. It was cumbersome to bring an animal as an offering. So, at the gates, there were money changers and offerings for sale to suit your pilgrim needs. Everything was decent, everything was orderly. It all made sense.

But then Jesus shows up with a whip of cords, driving the animals out, spilling the coins all over the ground, yelling, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

And you can just hear the church saying in response, “You know, Jesus, we’ve got a committee for this. We’ve talked about this. It’s been on an agenda; it’s been discussed already. This is not an abuse; this is just order.”

But perhaps this isn’t an *order* problem.

Scripture tells us, it’s a *zeal* problem:

After driving out the money changers, Jesus’s “disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house with consume me.’” Jesus had a zeal for God, for the things of God, for the Temple of God. And that’s not what he found there.

What he found, was commerce. An opportunity to make a quick dollar. A marketplace where those buying and selling seemed to have forgotten they were in the very dwelling place of God.

It was a Temple reduced a commodity.

Have you ever forgotten that you are in the very dwelling place of God?

And by that, I don’t mean church – I mean your life.

Have you ever felt, like you’ve lost your zeal, that you’re sleep-walking, in this life?

Think of the most perfunctory part of your day.

Why do you do what you do?:

- When you see the next patient, or client, or student,
- When you go to the next meeting, or the next class you attend,
- When you write the report that is due,
- Or you wait an hour in the school pick-up line for your kids

Does it ever feel like you’re on auto-pilot.

Because some days, if I’m honest, it feels like I’m on auto-pilot, and I’ve lost my zeal.

- Do we do what we do, just because it’s the way it’s always been done?
- Do we do it, because it is what is expected of us?
- Or do we do it because we believe in the reality and presence of God in our lives?

I get it.

We've got to get paid.

We've got to do what the boss or the administration tells us.

And Somebody's always got to clean up the kitchen.

The question of zeal, is a question of *why*?

Jesus asks us, 'What's your reason? Where's your zeal?'

Do we sleep-walk in this life, OR

When we do what we do, do we recognize, do we remember, that God touches your life and mine, and everyone else on this good earth?

Yolanda Pierce is the relatively new Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville. She wrote one of the most honest articles I think I've ever read in *the Christian Century* this week entitled, "Showing Up for Church When I Don't Want to."¹

She begins with all the reasons not to show up for church:

- The weather is beautiful and you'd rather sit on the porch and read the paper.
- Or there's a deadline, there's a worry, there something flying around in your mind, that seems more pressing than a service.
- Or you're just a bit sick of the politics of church, the hypocrisy of church.
 - And you're not sure you believe, what they say, at church, any more.

I can identify with every one of those statements.

And you all even pay me to be here.

Dr. Pierce goes on to say that sometimes she goes, more out of obligation than anything else:

- She's the dean of a divinity school; people expect to see her in church.
- She's a parent; she wants to set a good example.
- Or she doesn't want to feel the parent guilt again.

And again, I can say 'yes' to all of those reasons.

Do any of them ring true for you?

But, Dr. Pierce says, "I show up"

And when she shows up, she says, "God always meets me. God always shows up."

¹ Yolanda Pierce, "Showing Up for Church When I Don't Want to." *The Christian Century*. March 1, 2024.
<https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/showing-church-when-i-don-t-want>

And God even shows up in the most unexpected of ways:

Our churches are far too pastor-centric. She writes, We are so busy expecting the word of God to come from [the religious professionals] that we miss how God's presence arrives in other forms. Sometimes the word shows up in the person sitting next to you who hands you a peppermint. Sometimes the word comes from seeing the person who was in the hospital last month, now sitting in the pew in front of you. Sometimes the word comes from the audacious hat that one of the church mothers is wearing. God's powerful presence is all around us.

Now I understand, this is Westminster. We need to up our audacious hat game. But this article nonetheless asks us: Do you expect God to show up today? Or another way to put it, Where's your zeal?

Dr. Pierce finishes with a story: She was on leave for several weeks, traveling to various speaking engagements around the country. When she came back to church, she came back to her usual pew. Yolanda Pierce is not a Presbyterian, but I guess they do this in other denominations too, sitting in pews like they were assigned to us.

She said she saw a woman at church, whose name she does not know, but whom she had sat near for many a Sunday. The woman came up to her and said to her, "I missed your smile...the[se] past few weeks. I want you to know I'm praying for you and miss you when you're gone."

You see, Yolanda Pierce was greeted by a congregant, whose name she didn't even know. And in the space between them: God showed up. God showed up, and Dr. Pierce said that she began to cry when she heard that woman's words, because it were just what she needed, after many weeks away. She needed to be told that her presence mattered.

Can you remember that your presence matters? That what you do matters? That you matter?

Because wherever you are, that very place is the very dwelling place of God.

Because God is with you;

God is with you in this life.

And I can be honest to you, there are days when I have trouble remembering that. There are days, when you might ask me, why I do, what I do, and my answer will have nothing to do with zeal, or God.

Instead, I'll say:

Because it's my job

Because it's my obligation

Or it's on the agenda

Because if I don't do it, I don't think anybody else will.

But it's in those moments, when zeal is the last thing on my mind, Do you ever notice it? Because I see it all the time. That's when God comes bursting in?

Not so much with a whip and cords, but instead,

With a greeting in the narthex,

Or a text from a friend,

With a rally in a schoolboard meeting,

With a march for peace in a time of war.

And in those moments, I remember, that the dwelling place of God is among us.

Can you remember onto that, too, this week:

When you see your neighbor?

When you see your family?

When you look at yourself in the mirror?

How about, when you turn on the news?

And all you can feel is despair, for the war, for the bigotry, for the pain and hate in this world,

Can you also remember that God is here, and God is there, because God is at work in this world?

In our Scripture this week, Christ bursts in and calls out, "This is God's house!"

And he says that looking at us. He says that, inviting us, To take our lives seriously,

With *zeal*, zeal for this life.

Because this world and everyone within it are the very dwelling place of God. And we are God's beloved body. We are God's beloved people. Amen.