

- The 'cleansing of the Temple' story provides a *surprising* picture of Jesus. (*note Tissot image*) This provocative event has been a source of curiosity for many believers, and has fascinated generations of artists. In it, *Jesus not only speaks against what he finds in the Temple—he literally puts his hand to the matter, as well.* All four Gospels describe the occasion, and imply that *Jesus actions here seal his fate.* *What are we to make of this startling story, which John—unlike the others— puts at the beginning of his Gospel?*
- Like John, Matthew and Mark tell us how *Jesus overturns tables.* But John goes further, by reporting that *Jesus makes and uses a whip of cords!* Many have debated whether Jesus' behavior amounts to violence. To me, *it's an inescapable conclusion.* When we threaten people's *livelihood*, or the things they perceive as vital to their survival, we threaten *them.* In circumstances like this, *even a threat of harm can be perceived as violence.* Well-captured by James Tissot, *Jesus drives them all out of the Temple with a whip in hand.* What causes him to react so *strongly* to what he finds there?
- To help make sense of the story, we can start by asking how the Temple *functioned* in Jesus' time. *Among meanings the Temple had for people then, two primary possibilities emerge.* As we consider them, we need to be cautious about our tendency to treat pairs of terms in an *either/or* way, when *both could be true.*
- So how did people approach the Temple in Jesus' time? For many, the Temple was *a place to make spiritual offerings.* For others, it was *a place to make spiritual exchanges.* And, for some, it may have been a mix of the two. It's probable that first century pilgrims approached the Temple in a way that resembles our own motives for coming here ~ *some have come here to make a spiritual offering; and some may have come to make a spiritual exchange.* The *context* is the same, but the *intention* significantly differs.¹

- *Well, what is this difference between an exchange and an offering? When I make an **exchange** with you, I exchange something I value, for something that you have, and that you value. But when I make an **offering**, I make a **gift**. An **exchange** involves **giving and taking** ~ we give a thing, or a service, in return for another. *When we offer a gift, there is no mutual exchange; our offering stands whether or not our gift is reciprocated.* This **distinction between exchange and offering** illuminates our Gospel story, and helps us understand what we do here every Sunday.*
- **Offering** is a *universal* human gesture, and common to most forms of religion. Just as we offer things to each other, *we make offerings to divinity*. Placing a gift at a holy place, and intending it for the god who is worshipped there, we make what we call a **sacrifice**. From the latin, '**sacrifice**' literally means *to make something holy*. When we make a sacrificial gift to God, we make a holy offering by what we *do*, and *give*. *When, through love, we offer a gift to another person, we engage in a similar holy gesture of sacrifice. In each case, we give of ourselves, from all that we are, and from all that we have, without expecting a return. This is the heart of offering* ~ especially as it functions in religious practice, where it's almost always accompanied by thanksgiving. Being thankful is our chief source of motivation for offering sacrificial gifts to God and to others. We find this approach in the earliest Old Testament texts, right on through to the end of the New Testament.
- **Here is the key point:** Our practice of making *offerings* can be accompanied by, but also transformed into, a **different** approach to giving ourselves. *Over time, a spirit of offering may morph into an expectation of exchange, especially when we aren't deliberate about the process.* **Offering** is based on **thanks** for what *has been*, and for *what is*. *But an attitude of exchange is based on hope and expectation; it's about what is yet to happen, and about how we want things to be.* I bring an offering to church. While putting it in the plate, I mentally request a **particular result**. Though I think I'm making an

offering, what I'm really doing is initiating what I hope will be an exchange. In effect, *with my 'gift,' I'm saying to God, 'Hey! I'm making an important gesture!' I then hope God will honor my effort, and respond kindly to my request. Human nature being what it is, we expect that the greater the value of what we offer, will be matched by proportionately valuable results.*

- *We should not be distracted by the element of 'commerce' in our Gospel story. It's not **that** these merchants are providing animals for sacrifice, while others exchange coins. It's about **how** they approach their business, and **how** they're connected with the Temple officials. The place appears to have become something like a *commodities market*, where the sellers pursue the highest profit for themselves, and which may involve passing along some to the authorities. By contrast, John wants us to see **how Jesus embodies the original, God-ordained, function of the Temple. The Temple was and is our meeting place with God. Naturally, then, the Temple is where we make our thanks-offering to God.** Our Eucharistic gathering every Sunday is a direct extension of this. In every Eucharist, **through the "temple" of Jesus' body, we offer thanks and praise to God.***
- Given this, we need to note where *Jesus' evident frustration and anger* is directed. His anger is toward **the attitude of exchange, and how it usurps the role of offering.** If and when our meeting with God is seen as an exchange, we involve ourselves in a kind of *calculus*. *If I give, then I will receive!* If I give **much**, I may then receive **much**. **That** I give becomes more important than **how** I give. **The heart of Israelite religion had always been that God freely initiates and invites us, and then, we respond. But, with an attitude of exchange, I become the one who initiates, and God becomes the one who responds!** And, I will hope God responds generously, and soon!
- **When Jesus refers to his own body as a 'temple,' he unveils the inner meaning of this moment. He is not so much acting as a Teacher or as**

LENT 3, Mar. 4, 2018, Year B

Exemplar. Jesus is acting as the mediating Messiah, pointing to our new meeting place with God. It is *in him*. *When through him we are moved to give to God, we make offerings that are modeled on his own self-offering*. We make offerings that join him, and his own offering of the whole Creation to the Father, in the Spirit.

- Yet, *through our self-delusional imagining*, we often think that meeting God comes *from our* initiating some kind of exchange with the divine. What we miss in the process is this: *Love already loves us. Love surrounds us with holy presence, and imbues our being with transforming Spirit*. God loves us, whether in a bombed-out neighborhood in Damascus, or on a dark winter day in East Grand Rapids. *God's love finds us where we are, and embraces us even before we are aware of our need*. How else can we respond, but by offering all that we are, and all that we have, to the One from whom everything comes?



James Tissot, *Merchants Chased Out From the Temple*

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. [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. He told those who were selling the doves, [“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”](#) His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.

Notes:

¹ I want to give credit to John Shea for helping me to appreciate some aspects of this distinction. See his book, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Mark, Year B, Eating with the Bridegroom* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2005), p. 90ff.