

“Relational vs Transactional”
Psalm 19:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25;
John 2:13-22

3rd Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2021
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What Jesus is this? It says he has zeal. He is creating a cord to use as a whip. That word “zeal” comes from a word that means “to boil over.” So when it says Jesus had zeal, he was boiling over with emotion. That is not the Jesus I usually think about. I don’t really think about Jesus as a person boiling over with emotion or getting upset. Yet, as he comes into the Temple grounds that day, he is upset.

If we really looked at how big that area that he came into was, it’s pretty unlikely that he was able to push everybody out at one time. Yet this is great street theater. It is a moment when he is addressing what’s going on and getting attention to be heard. And what is it that he says is bothering him? He says, “You have turned my father’s house into a marketplace.”

That idea of a marketplace, a place where you exchange goods and services, is a transactional kind of place. I don’t think he’s saying that we never have those transactional kinds of places. But in the Temple, in the family of faith, our relationships are not about being transactional. He described over and over again how much it is our purpose to care for one another, to love one another, to be servants for one another. It’s not about what we get out of those relationship for ourselves, but it’s about caring for the other.

That may not be the only piece. It’s not just that it’s transactional. There are times and places for transactions. There are marketplaces. But he says, “It’s my Father’s house.” I was thinking about that, and what would happen if, when I decided to go home for Thanksgiving in my parents’ house, my siblings said, “If you want to come for Thanksgiving, you have to pay for the turkey. And if you want to have time with your parents, there is a cost involved.”

You see, as people came into the Temple, there was this idea that they had to pay something to be present, to be there with God. They had to buy something so that they could create the sacrifice that would allow them to talk to God. Jesus is a little upset about that. If my siblings did that to me, I think I would be a little upset as well. God doesn’t want the relationship to be transactional. God’s gift of grace, God’s gift of Christ to us pays for our sin in our place, no cost to us.. There is no barrier to us in coming to God.

When it talks about Jesus having zeal for his Father’s house, it is that all are welcome in God’s house. It’s not transactional. There’s no barrier. There’s no pay to play. God is available and he doesn’t want anything in the way.

If we think about it, the idea that these sacrifices were still there really focuses back on an older time when this idea of sacrifice was a symbol for recognizing God’s gift,

because everybody probably had a flock, and everybody had things they could bring out of their own life rather than having to buy it. It was a reminder of God's provision. Oftentimes after the sacrifice there was a feast based on what had been sacrificed. But as time had gone on, it became something that no longer worked.

Amos suggested that God would say this about sacrifices: "I hate and despise your festivals, take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals." There was already a move afoot. If we go on, Amos talks about what God really wants – justice and righteousness.

So when God offers this surprise gift of love, grace, there is no barrier. There is nothing in the way. The problem is that Jesus is asking for things to change so that there is not a barrier to God. Those who are profiting off of what is going on, or invested in what's going on don't necessarily want change. In this case, it was the Sadducees who were probably pretty happy to have that marketplace there because they received the funds. They probably made money off of what was going on. There was probably even a Temple tax. They didn't really want to change. They asked Jesus, "What sign do you bring?" It's a way of saying, "What are your credentials? How can you say this? Why should we listen to you?"

It is an interesting question. Who do we listen to, and why? What's the credential or the wisdom we think a person has, and why? Why would we listen to Jesus, for example, in this case rather than the Sadducees? Jesus doesn't offer a credential. Jesus suggests that he will continue in his ministry in a way that will show who he is. But in the moment, and in our moments, how do we decide who we're listening to, whether we should change our lives or not, what is the purpose for change? Change for change's sake is not the idea.

But there is a reason to change. Here, Jesus is saying the reason to change is so that people can be cared for. People can come to God. People can hear and know God's grace. In Mark, he says it can be a house of prayer for all the nations. So change, as it helps bring us to a place of caring better for others, is a reason for change.

It feels to me like oftentimes in our society we are struggling with change because the idea is that we're caring for others and we don't want to care for others. There's a move afoot to say we should not care for everyone. Let's care for the ones in power. Let's care for the white people, or let's care for just a few. Let's care for the people that are already here. When Jesus says it is a house of prayer for all nations, he's talking about everyone.

When we listen to Jesus, when we listen in our own lives for what we should pay attention to, I think we hear over and over again that we are invited to compare that to what we read in scripture, to what we see in who Jesus is and what he calls us to. I think it's pretty clear. Over and over again, he calls us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The whole of the prophets could really be summed up in

basically the same phrase: love God and make sure that your relationships among yourselves are just and right.

We know what the Bible teaches. We know what the fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We know what we can compare someone like Jesus to and why he had a zeal for his father's house. And as we live our lives and we look at the world in which we live, how do we compare it to what God has called us to, to who God is, and what God's way is about? If we follow Jesus, I wonder if sometimes we might see or feel that zeal ourselves, to feel emotions boiling over about what God wants – that God's house be a place of prayer for all nations, a place of welcome and hospitality.

We recognize that there is no pay to play to get into the family of God. It is in accepting of God's grace, a realization that God loves all God's children. Can we listen and see if it accords with God's will, not because of somebody's credentials or worldly wisdom, but because it's a way of loving God or loving neighbor. It's a way of creating a space, a place, a society that is more just. Can we see that in Christ, the love of God comes to heal, to redeem, to save us from ourselves and from the evil we so easily turn to in order to get our own way?

How do we have zeal for the house of God, for the work of Jesus, for the grace that God gives, for the justice God wants? How can we have a zeal for our love of God, the worship of God, and our love of our neighbors rather than justifying ourselves? Amen.