

John 2:13-25

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.

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Deuteronomy 14:22-29

Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together.

As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you. Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

Not long after the wedding at Cana that we talked about last week, Passover comes around, and Jesus goes up to Jerusalem. This, in and of itself, is not remarkable. All faithful Jews want to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem, the center of their worship of God.

Jesus walks into the Temple, and he is confronted by a marketplace. People are selling cattle, sheep, and doves for sacrifices, and the money-changers are there, too. The laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy call for sacrifices of these animals for various reasons: to thank God for the harvest, to thank God for the birth of a healthy child, to apologize to God for sin, *et cetera*. Rather than haul a calf or a lamb with you as you walk for a week to the Temple from your home in Galilee, you can buy one here and save the trouble.

The money-changers are there because, they will tell you, you can't give God money that says right on it that Caesar is Lord. That may not violate any of God's laws, but they will tell you that it is disrespectful. The money-changers, like the money-changers you see in an international airport today, will change your Roman money to silver Temple currency. Just like in the airport, the exchange rates are adjusted slightly from the value of the money, to make sure that the money-changers make a profit.

These merchants are not setting out to do evil. For them, this is a job. They probably even see it as helping the people who came to buy from them.

But the mere fact that they do not intend to be obstacles between God's people and God, does not mean that they are not obstacles. If you don't have the money to buy a bull, or a sheep, or two doves, then you are shut out. If you only have just enough money to give, and can't afford the money-changers' cut, you are shut out. These merchants and moneychangers are obstacles.

I can easily imagine the priests saying, "You didn't buy this lamb here? You brought it from home? I'm sorry, but, you see that blemish? This lamb is not good enough to sacrifice to God. Next!" The Temple priests do not mean to be obstacles: they mean to make sure that everything sacrificed to God in the Temple is properly holy. But they are obstacles.

Jesus sees these people being obstacles, stumbling-blocks, to the people who want to come to God. We will talk next week about the specific reasons that Jesus came down here, was born, lived, died, and was resurrected, but I'll give you a sneak peek: Jesus came down here to remove all the obstacles between God and God's people. He came and lived among us.

The moment that Jesus was born, the world changed. People did not need to come to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship God in the best possible place. They needed to go where Jesus was. While Jesus was walking around on Earth, that was a specific place at any given time. After Jesus's Ascension, that is everywhere we go. Jesus told us to, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."¹

But that is still in the future at the time of our Gospel story today. Jesus sees people coming to the Temple to come to God, and he sees these merchants being obstacles to that happening.

Jesus gets angry. He drives all the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple, telling them to "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

The Gospel says that "the Jews" come to Jesus. What John means is not all the Jews. John is not being Anti-Semitic here, and we should not read John that way. What John means are the leaders of the Temple. It takes a lot less vellum to say, "the Jews," than it takes to say, "The Chief Priest and the other leaders of the Temple religious organizations." Vellum is expensive. So that's the shorthand that John is using here.²

These Jewish leaders come to Jesus and say, essentially, "What authority do you have to do this? And can you prove it?"

¹ Matthew 28:20.

² Yes, I am aware of the divisions at the time that the Fourth Gospel was written down: this is the simplified version I am presenting in worship. I will go into more detail in the Lenten class I am teaching on the Gospel of John.

I can picture Jesus tapping his chest as he explains, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The word he uses here³ literally refers to the innermost part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, the very place where God is said to reside.⁴ Jesus is talking about his body.

As people often seem to do in John’s Gospel, the priests misunderstand Jesus. They think he’s talking about the enormous building complex that surrounds them, and they are confused and offended. “We’ve been building this Temple for forty-six years, and you’re going to destroy it, then rebuild it in three days?” This is not something that they can even take seriously.

So, what does this story tell us about Jesus?

It tells us that Jesus gets angry when people put obstacles between other people and God. It does not even have to be intentional – it is still bad, and it still makes Jesus angry. Jesus is not often depicted in the Bible as being angry, so this is important.

How do we put obstacles in the way between other people and God?

Some obstacles are things that “good Christian” people do.

Every child ever molested by a pastor, or a teacher, or another authority figure, has obviously had a tremendous obstacle put in their way. But they are not the only ones.

Every person who has been gossiped about has had an obstacle put in their way. There is a difference between genuine concern and gossip. Concern is about helping; gossip is about the salacious details or about hurting someone with your words.

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⁴ This is the place that only one human being ever went, and that was a priest chosen by lot to enter once in a year, because this place was so holy to God. This is the place where Zechariah heard the Lord’s voice, announcing the birth of John the Baptist, when Zechariah was that priest (Luke 1:5-23).

Every person whose story may not be told, or to whom people will not listen, has had an obstacle put in their way.

Every person who has ever been told to leave, or told that “their kind” are not wanted has had an obstacle put in their way.

Every person who has ever been told to stay in their place, when they have been given the gifts to do more, has had an obstacle put in their way.

But these are not the only obstacles. A lot of obstacles have to do with expectations.

“Well, it’s be nice if he dressed up to come to church...”

Dressing up for worship is a fine thing. It shows respect for God and respect for the people around you. I am not trying to discourage anyone from dressing up for church, if you are able and you want to.

But there is a problem when that becomes what we expect from other people.

What looks to some people like not making any effort may be the best that someone can wear to church. And God knows that. I myself was not wearing a tie or a collar last Sunday – did you notice? I was wearing cargo pants, sneakers, and a T-shirt under my robe, because I had not expected to be released from the hospital in time to make it to the service. But it was okay.

God knew what was going on. And God would rather have me here, worshipping, than sitting at home, no matter how I’m dressed. The same applies to you. And to the person next to you in the pew. If anyone ever feels unwelcome in worship or another church activity, due to how they are dressed, then I tell you, we are putting up an obstacle, intentional or not, between them and God. We, the majority in the church, are sinning. And we are called to repent.

“But, Pastor, she doesn’t look like the other people here.”

The Early Church was, at that point, the most heterogeneous, even eclectic group of people in the whole Roman Empire. Roman citizens and slaves, Africans, Italians, Turks, Greeks, even Northern Barbarians like my ancestors, all worshipping God together. And usually in the house of some rich Roman matron.

Over the years, we’ve lost that understanding of God’s people, partially in an effort to try to justify what could not be justified, that is to say, slavery. Eleven o’clock Sunday morning is still, as Doctor King said, the most segregated hour in Christian America.⁵

This is wrong.

This is an obstacle being put up in front of people who want to worship God – finding a congregation that matches their apparent racial makeup and their socioeconomic status. That is an obstacle being put between God’s people and God.

And that is sin.

That is systemic sin, and that is personal sin committed by anyone who makes anyone feel unwelcome among God’s people here, or in any congregation anywhere in the world, based on their race, or their appearance, or their socioeconomic status, or their native language, or their gender, or any other thing about them. And we are called to repent.

God does not want obstacles between us and God. God wants us to be free to worship God. God wants that for everyone. For all of us are God’s children, and all of us must be welcome in his house.

Thanks be to God.

⁵ He said it so many times that I won’t try to document the first time he said it.

AMEN