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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 8, 2015

Text: John 2:13–22

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Jesus of the Bible is truly one of those larger than life type persons that defy nice, neat categories. He doesn't think, act, and talk like anyone else. He is completely unique. John 2 illustrates the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus in a couple of powerful ways. John 2:1–12, the verses just before our reading for today, contains the account of Jesus changing 180 gallons of water into fine wine. It was a marvelous wedding gift for a newlywed couple at Cana in Galilee. Lots of joy and laughter were shared on account of Jesus' gift. John declares this to be the first of Jesus' miracles. As a result of water being turned into wine His glory was manifested and His disciples believed in Him (vs. 11).

And then there is today's gospel reading from John 2:13–22. Here, Jesus is red-faced and furious. According to vs. 15, Jesus makes a homemade whip of cords and drives out the animals in the Temple courtyard and those who tended them. The moneychangers' tables are overturned. Money is flying everywhere. People are in confusion. Who's this wild, madman running through the temple courts? If Jesus did these things today, He'd be charged with committing an act of terrorism.

Which Jesus do you prefer? Which Jesus do you want your kids to know and love? The wine-giving, marriage loving Jesus who brings good cheer to all? Or the fanatical zealot who will not allow God's Word and worship be corrupted by man's sinful ambitions?

The truth of the matter is you don't really have a choice. We can't pick and choose which Jesus we like, to the dismay of many today who want to mold Jesus into an image of their own making. I'm sure you've heard well-meaning people say that it doesn't really matter what you believe or where you worship so long as you believe in Jesus. Too often this kind of thinking presents a Jesus who makes few demands. Seldom is it the Jesus who requires faith and obedience, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15) or the Jesus who forgives the worst of sinners, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (Jn 8:11) or the Jesus

who says to the faithful on the Last Day, “Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34) and to unbelievers, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

But this selective reading of the Lord Jesus will never do. We can't pick and choose. The Jesus who loves to give His gifts freely and graciously, as we learned in the wedding at Cana, is also the same Jesus who expects His people to worship Him in truth and purity, as we see in the cleansing of the Temple. And thanks be to God we can't pick and choose. For the Jesus we'd make up would be inferior to the Biblical Jesus, one not worthy of our wholehearted devotion and trust.

Today, we consider Jesus as He cleanses the Temple in righteous zeal for truth and purity. The setting is the Passover Feast in Jerusalem. The holy city would have been packed to overflowing with pilgrims coming from all over Israel and the Roman Empire. Our Lord enters the Temple and sees the travesty occurring there in the name of God, in the name of His Father. The Temple was reduced to a business emporium setup for the monetary profit of the religious establishment. And Jesus will have none of it. So He sweeps it away in righteous wrath.

What's at stake in all this is not some nostalgic longing for the worship practice of the “good ole days.” The Temple in Jerusalem had ceased being a house of prayer, faith, and promise. The OT Law, in Deuteronomy 14:24–26, had provided that those traveling a long distance to the temple could purchase an animal for sacrifice in Jerusalem. But the exception, intended to be a blessing for some, was corrupted into greedy commerce; money to be made in the name of God.

Jesus couldn't stand to see His Father's house be abused in such a way. The place of God's presence turned into a den of thieves and corruption; it couldn't be left alone no matter what the consequences. And there would be consequences. The line is drawn in the sand and the Jewish religious establishment will kill Jesus for what He did.

And we must be very cautious, people of God, not to turn our worship services or our Christian walk of devotion into another form of human and divine commercialism. The church is not a business and it can't be run like one. We must be wise stewards of God's gifts of money, time and talents. They are to be used for the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to Christ's command and desire. Our congregation's worship and her offerings are never to be used as manipulative tools. Examples abound: “If I go to church, worship, sing, pray, and

listen to preaching then God will prosper my business, give me good health, and bless my family. If I give my offerings God will give a good return so that I get more back than what I gave in the first place.”

I suspect Jesus would come into such worship services and throw out our offering plates and hymnals and preach true repentance, faith and trust in God’s saving promises. Those who desire to worship God rightly must do so in spirit and in truth, Jesus teaches in John 4.

After Jesus cleansed the Temple, the Jews came to Him and asked for a sign to justify His actions. Our Lord told them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (vs. 19). The Jews didn’t understand what Jesus was saying even as they didn’t understand that the Temple was a place of worship and sacrifice, not commerce and trade. They thought Jesus was talking about destroying the brick and mortar Temple that had been in construction for 46 years. But Jesus was talking about the flesh and blood Temple that would be destroyed on the cross and raised again on the third day. Jesus’ death and resurrection is the sign justifying His actions.

Death and resurrection is how God chooses to work in the lives of His people. That’s another one of those ideas that people find uncomfortable. It’s one thing to talk about spirituality; it’s all quite fuzzy and nebulous with little or no significant content. It’s quite another to talk about crucifying our sinful flesh through repentance and mortification (Mk 8:34–38; Gal 2:20) and walking in the resurrection life of the Lord Jesus (Rom 6:4).

Jesus is signaling to the Jews of His day and to the Christians of our day that He is the end of bargaining with God. One does not do things to be in God’s good grace, rather, things are done to you to make you pleasing to God. You are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus’ death and resurrection is preached into your hearts and minds week after week. The sacrifice of Christ’s cross and resurrection is placed in your mouth week after week in the body and blood of Christ given in Holy Communion. There is nothing for us to do except receive these precious gifts, be thankful for them, and rejoice in the power of God’s Spirit as we live day after day by faith and obedience in these promises.

You see, the miracle at Cana and the cleansing of the Temple point to the same Savior: the Lord Jesus who died and rose again for the salvation and healing of the nations. The wine given at Cana pointed to the coming day of celebration when Jesus

would die and rise again for your salvation. And we rejoice this day in that salvation through Word, Holy Communion, songs, hymns, and prayer all the while looking forward to the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb in His kingdom. The cleansing of the Temple pointed toward the perfect sacrifice offered by the greater Temple, Jesus, the Son of God. And we stand before God this day pure and clean with a desire to worship Him in spirit, truth, and purity because of that holy offering given on your behalf by the Lord Jesus Himself.

You see Jesus is larger than life for He is the Lord and God of life. Our dear Lord surprises us, challenges us, and most of all, saves us and calls us His own dear people. By His grace and with His strength, let us live and rejoice and celebrate in the gifts He gives to us each and every day.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.