



# The Trinity Pulpit



**Sold!**

**John 2:12-22**

Dr. Jeff Roberts

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When I was growing up, there were always pictures of Jesus in Sunday School. Although we don't know exactly what Jesus looked like, that has not caused artists to keep from painting, drawing and sculpting images of Jesus. An art historian can tell us the various morphing that the image of Jesus has gone through throughout the history of artistic expression. When I was in New York City several years ago there was an inner city ministry where I served for a few days where artists had created images of Jesus which connected to inner city kids. There was a painting of an African American Jesus coming out of the tomb dressed in urban clothing. There was a drawing of a Hispanic Jesus with the children upon his knee. All of these expressions of Jesus were meant to connect to those who this ministry was trying to reach. It was an attempt to be relevant in this community.

Many of us might find these pictures uncomfortable to view simply because we know they are not historically correct, but more than that because we have become comfortable with our own image of Jesus. Most of us picture Jesus as tall with long hair and a beard, blue eyes (which, by the way, is really not historical), and always having a mild and meek expression on his face. The only other expression we are comfortable with is an expression of agony from the cross. A few years ago people were shocked by the magazine cover that featured the laughing Jesus. It made us uncomfortable because we never picture Jesus laughing. I want to suggest that there is another picture of Jesus in our text today that we are uncomfortable with. That is the angry Jesus.

The angry Jesus is just not a picture we want in our minds. We do not want to think that Jesus could become angry. We want to

believe he took everything in stride and had very little when it comes to the expression of emotions. Yet, John reminds us, as well as the other gospels, that there was at least this one instance when Jesus became angry. John gives us more insight than the other three gospels in this matter.

Let me make a couple of comments about this story in the gospels. In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – this story is found in the final week of Jesus. It occurs when Jesus enters Jerusalem in the triumphal entry and then goes to the Temple and finds those selling and exchanging money, and he drives them out of the Temple courts. In response to this being a moment of pure unbridled anger on Jesus' part, Mark gives us some insight into Jesus' frame of mind on this day. He tells us that the day before, Jesus had entered the Temple and looked around and saw everything that was going on, but because it was late, he went home. Mark seems to suggest that Jesus had planned this action.

John places this story at the beginning of his gospel. It is placed not in the final week but in a visit to Jerusalem and the Passover. John tells us that when Jesus sees them selling cattle, doves and sheep, he made a whip out of cords and began to drive not only the people from the temple area but the animals as well. He went over to where the exchange of money was occurring and turned over the tables so that the money was scattered across the ground. All the while he is saying with exclamation points, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my father's house into a market?"

However you want to interpret this or read this text from John with its chronological issues and its more detailed description,

one thing can be sure—what we get is a picture of Jesus unleashing a holy anger and wrath upon those who had gathered there. What would drive the meek, humble, loving, kind and caring Jesus to such an action in the very House of God?

Many have suggested that the issue here is selling things in the Temple, that the problem was that there is never a place for selling things in a place of worship. I, like many of you, grew up not having things sold in the church. In our church we have policies so that the church does not become a place where one is confronted with merchandise week after week. I know that there are some of you that wish we never sold anything and there are some of you that do not see anything wrong with it. We all know there are churches where the selling of merchandise is a weekly and celebrated thing. The seeker church of our day is many times filled with coffee houses, bookstores and other merchandise that the congregant can purchase.

Now, let me say that my personal preference is not to let the church become a merchandising machine. I must admit that there are things like books and literature that the church can provide that become tools for spiritual growth. But, for the most part, I just don't think we want to come to church to get bombarded with merchandise. But before you think that this text is simply about whether to sell things in a place of worship, think again. In fact, to dismiss this text as simply about this issue is to miss what really brought Jesus to this place of such a drastic action.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, which is a place that is holy, a place of sacrifice and a place of inclusion, I want to suggest to you that it was not merely animals they sold in the Temple, and it was not only money they had exchanged. Let me suggest three things they sold and exchanged which we are also tempted to do.

First, they sold themselves in regards to sacrifice. The truth is, those who were worshipping in the Temple had exchanged sacrifice for convenience. We are told that there were marketplaces within the Temple walls. Most agree that these markets were in the first wall of the Temple or the gentile court. These marketplaces were in place for one reason and that was convenience. As pilgrims

began to have to travel long ways to the Temple to worship and offer a sacrifice, it became inconvenient to bring with them their own sacrifice. So, what they would do is just buy a sacrifice when they arrived. There was the poor man's sacrifice – the dove. There was the sheep, a sacrifice for sin. Here John even mentions cattle, a sacrifice for burnt offering.

Here is the issue. The sacrifice was to be from the person and individual. When first developed, the sacrificial system was just that – a sacrifice. It was meant to really cost you to come to worship. You were to present your best. Your lamb without blemish. The best of your crops, the best of your belongings. But gone was the demand to bring a sacrifice. Yes, you had to pay for these animals and that might be seen as a sacrifice, but the truth be known, these animals were not the best. Many of them had defects and were simply there for the convenience of the worshipper.

They exchanged sacrifice for convenience. How easy it is to exchange sacrifice for convenience. Now, I am not talking about our surroundings. I am not speaking of the beautiful place where we worship or the time we choose to worship. I am speaking of something much more. I am asking us to consider as we come to the Lord's Table—a place we are reminded of sacrifice—how long it has been since we offered a true sacrifice to God? How long has it been since we were inconvenienced for the cause of Christ? How long since we denied ourselves something to give to a missions

offering or to simply tithe? How long since we gave up some personal time to serve another? How long since we broke out of our routine to share time with someone who is in need of Christ's love?

There is a story from the life of David in 2 Samuel 24. There is a plague on David's men and God tells him to go to Araunah's home and build an altar

and offer sacrifice. David obeys and arrives at Araunah's home. Araunah is thrilled to have the King at his home and allows him to build an altar there. Not only does Araunah let King David build an altar, but he offers him everything he needs for the sacrifice. He tells David, "Take anything you need to offer as a sacrifice." But David says, "No, I will pay for it." Then David says, "I will not offer a sacrifice to God that costs me nothing."



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They had exchanged the sense of sacrifice for convenience. It had happened so gradually that they had not even realized it had happened. How long has it been since we really made a sacrifice?

They exchanged the holy for the familiar. This was simply by the presence of the marketers within the Temple walls. Now the entire Temple was to be a place of worship. If you remember, the Temple was built with ever increasing places of exclusion and holiness. There was the center place, the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could go. There was the altar area, then the court of men, the court of gentiles and the court of women, and then there was another wall and there was a Temple area. Many scholars disagree where this occurred. Some say within the gentile and women's courts which would suggest that there were those who did not consider the worship of gentiles or women to be worthy worship. Others say it was in the Temple area around the courts. Whatever the case, they had exchanged a place that there was to be reverence, worship and the sense of holiness with the familiar sights and sounds of the marketplace. In this place there would have been disputes over prices, dickering and bartering between merchant and customer. There would have been the sounds of a busy market street that was familiar everywhere else in the city, but the Temple was to be a place of prayer. It was to be a place that was different than everyday life.

There need to be times when we grasp a sense of holiness or otherness. William Barclay tells a story about a man who took some children to a cathedral one day. These were children who had grown up with very little discipline. They were described as wild children. However, once they went through the doors of the cathedral, something happened. They became silent and reserved. They waked around looking at the stained glass and the setting of worship without comment. On the way home, they remained silent and somber. It was hours later until they returned to their normal boisterousness.

Have we lost a sense of holiness even in the place we come to worship? Our church, like every church today, has been influenced by seeker church movement of the 1980s and 90s. The

seeker movement was simply to create church that did not seem like church. You dressed as you wanted, no more ties and jackets. Come in shorts and flip flops if you like. No more boring hymns; let's sing music like we hear on the top 40 throughout the week. That is more familiar and easier to sing. We did not construct sanctuaries, maybe a worship center, and let's not put a lot of religious symbols in the worship space. Let's make it as familiar as possible. Now, to be sure the seeker church has reached a lot of people for Christ that the traditional church would not have

reached. It has its place in American Christianity. But, interestingly, the guru of all seeker churches, Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church, recently announced that their approach to church had left many individuals as simply babes in Christ. Their approach had not allowed people to grow in their faith. What was going to be needed was an overhaul of ministry.

What I hear our young people saying is not give me more of the familiar, but give me something that is different. Give me something that I cannot experience anywhere else. In other words, let it be other, be different, be holy.

It is easy for us to exchange the holy for the familiar when we come to worship. We like things familiar because we are comfortable with the familiar, but unknowingly, in our attempt to be comfortable and familiar, we lose that which is holy.

Barclay says it happens when we formalize worship and just push through it. It happens when we treat prayers like an auctioneers catalogue. It happens when we do not recognize that we are worshipping God – the God of all things – and get, as he describes it, “pal-y” with God. It happens when the leaders and the congregation have not prepared themselves spiritually and mentally to worship. It is easy to exchange the holy for the familiar.

The last exchange is inclusion for exclusion. The Temple was designed for everyone to come and worship. The gentiles and women were excluded to some degree, but there was a place for them. However, with the continued noise around their courts it would have been hard to pray. In addition, the money exchangers were making it hard



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for the poor to participate. There was not only a temple tax that had to be paid to sacrifice, but as pilgrims came from other places with currency that had another king or idol on it, it had to be exchanged for temple coin, and with any money exchange there was going to be a charge for the service. There is some suggestion that an exploitation of the poor was occurring to the point they were being excluded.

If there is anywhere that people ought to be included, it is in worship. If there is anywhere that is created for all who will come, it is into the presence of God. We were just reminded last week that God sent Jesus that whosoever would believe, they could receive eternal life. But the money changers had participated, knowingly or unknowingly, in excluding people from being able to sacrifice and worship.

Now, listen for a moment. I am not sure that any of these individuals began with the thought to exchange sacrifice, holiness and inclusion. In fact, they may have thought that what they were doing was helpful and right. But what began as a way to enable others to worship became a system to exclude people from true worship. It took Jesus that day acting in a very dramatic way to awaken them to what the Temple had become.

Today we come to the Lord's Table. There are times when we need to be startled back into reflection. The Lord's Table can do that for us today. As we come, we remember the Lord's sacrifice and we must examine our lives and discover if we might have exchanged a life of sacrifice for a life of convenience. We eat the bread and drink the cup, and we are reminded that this is a holy place. We must enter this moment reverently and quietly as we consider what it means to enter into the very presence of God. It is not like any other moment and every other moment. It is a holy moment. We take this ordinance as communion. A place where we come as a community of faith, and we are reminded that it is easy to exclude people in the very place where all are included.

What have we sold? What we have we exchanged?

