

Picture of Golf Course

In my first church Bethel Lutheran with 5 pastors and 6000 people we divided up hospitals calls. Wednesday was my day. Sometimes it would take the entire day just seeing everyone. So I had been there about a year and I made a visit. This person says to me, you must be a new pastor. Then she said, we use to be front row every Sunday until our kids were confirmed. After that, we just started Golfing on Sundays. She said to me, I believe God is with us on the Golf course? I agreed with her. But I wasn't very smart. Because looking back I could have said the following. Well, that is true, but what are you doing now that it is January! I tell you this story because at the heart of today's lesson is the place where God dwells.

Picture of Temple Cleansing

We have heard this story often. Jesus drives out the money changers and all the animals out of the temple. It is interesting that in the other Gospels this story happens much later. John puts it right at the front. It follows last week's action of turning water into wine. Matthew tells us that God's house is to be a house of prayer. John doesn't say anything about that. People have wrongly taken this text to mean that we shouldn't have any bake sales at church. Selling really isn't the point for John. But we need to ask a very good Lutheran question that Martin Luther included in the Small Cateschism.

What does this Mean?

Before we answer this question, we need to remind ourselves of basic temple practices. It begins in the Torah in Dueteronomy 14:24-26

²⁴But 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,²⁵ then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the LORD your God will choose; ²⁶spend 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

This is in reference to an offering of tithes. The transport “it” is the offering of grain, sheep whatever. You will also notice that they are to throw themselves a party. There you have it. They are doing this because the Torah commanded them to do it. If you live too far away, sell your cattle locally, and bring the money and buy cattle in Jerusalem. The other reason of course is to come and do the same thing to buy animals so they can be offered as sacrifice. So they had two reasons for this practice. The first is to celebrate God's blessings. The second is to worship God and to receive God's atonement or forgiveness. So you can see that in their minds, they are doing exactly what the Bible directs.

Now in other versions of the Gospels you may recall the line, you have made this place a den of robbers. This is interpreted to mean, the scales were fixed. In John, Jesus just says, stop making my Father's house a marketplace. Now think about what happens here on a Sunday morning. We have all sorts of roles we play here. Who is going to set up worship? Who is going to prepare the altar? We never have enough people for Altar Guild! What is the choir going to sing? Who is going to prepare the bulletin? Who will usher? We hope the pastor doesn't sleep in? Who, who, who. We can get so caught up in the logistics of worship that we forget why we are here in the first place. So again we ask, What does this mean?, for Jesus to Cleanse the Temple.

Another way to ask that question, is What is at the Heart of Worship? Jesus is going to flip the world upside down. We read the following in John 2:18-19

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.

In John, the group known as Jews are often those that don't see Jesus as Messiah. So now Jesus is saying that there will be a new temple. There will be a new way of worship. The temple is no longer a building. The temple is now Jesus. This is important because you see the Temple was destroyed around 40 ad, so when John wrote this Gospel, the Jewish Temple did not exist.

The temple for the Jewish people is simply the designated place where God dwells. Now God isn't going to dwell just in the temple. When Jesus dies, the curtains to the temple is torn in tow. God is now released from the Holy of the Holies, to the world. So part of what does this mean comes to access to God. God is no longer reserved for the high priest once a year. God is no longer reserved for the special holy ones. God's presence is now for everyone. So the Jews according to Deuteronomy are supposed to tithe, and throw a party. What did Jesus do last week? He turned water into wine and what a party it was. But this new way, this new temple means much more than that.

Before Jesus, the action was all on human beings. Worship was about coming to the temple and offering sacrifices. Humans did the acting. But there is a sidebar that should be addressed. Did you ever think about the ones who did not have anything to offer? The poor too often stayed away. Not only did they not have the right clothes, they wouldn't have the money to purchase animals or grain. This means the poor would not have access to God. But now, God's access is open to everyone. Because you see, at the heart of worship is not what we do for God, but what God does for us! So it is no longer about what we might sacrifice for God, but to ponder, rejoice, celebrate what God has sacrificed for us.

Since God has sacrificed for us, than the presence of God is now found in the one for whom John says, the Word has become flesh. I don't know if you realize it or not but there is an order to our liturgy. There is a reason we sing what we sing.

Slide 1: Kyrie
Slide 2 Hymn of Praise
Slide 3 Preface
Slide 4 Hosanna
Slide 5 Lamb of God.

So through it all, we believe that Jesus is present in communion and we praise God for all that God has done for us. Do you know what is really neat. It is not about us at all. Amen.