

Marketplaces and Weddings - Tyler Merrill

Psalm 19; John 2:13-22

We've just listened together to a story that has two main parts. In the first part, Jesus enters the temple courts, makes a whip and chases out money-changers, cattle, and merchants. In the second part, Jesus talks about destroying and raising up the Temple. Many of us have listened to another story recently, a story about race and community restoration, told by John Perkins, who identifies 3 "R's" of community development: redistribution, relocation, and reconciliation.

What I'd like to do with you this morning is to read the gospel story in its two parts. The first part, the cleansing of the temple, I will read as a story that has everything to do with redistribution. The second part, Jesus' statement about destroying and rebuilding the temple, I will read as a story that has everything to do with relocation. And finally, even though all of this sounds terribly serious, I will argue that, in the end, it all just boils down to a story about potluck.

So let's begin with the first part of the story. Jesus enters the outer court of the Temple and observes a distribution system. Merchants are selling cattle, sheep, and doves and money-changers are exchanging currency. Jesus would not have been surprised by this. The Passover was near, a pilgrimage-festival requiring animal sacrifices according to Levitical law. Many Jews would have traveled distances too far to bring their own animals, so they would have needed to buy these animals when they got to Jerusalem. As for the money-changers, these people exchanged blasphemous Roman coins, which bore the image of Caesar, with lawful Tyrian ones, with which Jews could pay a Temple tax. So all of the things Jesus finds when he enters the Temple court are present because Jews are seeking to honor God's gift of the law, which is *more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb*.

However, upon finding merchants, cattle, and money changers, Jesus flips over their tables, pours out their coins, makes a whip out of cords, and chases them out of the temple! When Jesus performs these acts in the Synoptic gospels, it appears to be because the merchants and money-changers are abusing their positions to profit themselves. He calls the court a den of *robbers*. But in our story today, individual abuses are not condemned. Instead, Jesus critiques the entire system, shouting, *Stop making my father's house a marketplace!* Apparently the Temple's distribution system, designed to honor the law of God, is not what Jesus has in mind. But what alternative system might Jesus have to offer? We will return to this question later.

Part two of this morning's story begins with the Jews questioning how in the world Jesus thought he had the authority to disrupt the temple's rituals on one of the most important feast days of the year. Jesus replies to them, *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*. "Yeah right," respond the Jews, "it has taken forty-six years to build this temple." But when Jesus speaks about the temple, he has a different location in mind: his body.

For Judaism, the Temple was the locus of God's presence on earth. Jesus critiques this location, and re-locates it. He claims that the new location of God's presence on earth is his body.

Now that's all well and good for the people who were hanging out with Jesus in 30 A.D., but where is Jesus' body today? Where is the locus of God's presence this morning? Over the years, the church has called three things the body of Christ: the body of Jesus that lived, died, and was resurrected; the Eucharist; and the church. If you're paying attention in worship, you can watch as each of these bodies become featured. Right now, as our attention is fixed on the gospel story, the locus of God's presence is in the body of Jesus that lived, died, and was resurrected. But we are just getting started!

Pretty soon the body of Christ will relocate to beneath that napkin. As our attention becomes fixed on the Eucharist, we will see that the locus of God's presence on earth is also in food, and more specifically, in food that is freely given, broken and shared. It is in this form of Christ's body that the new distribution system is most obvious.

When we take Communion, it looks nothing like a marketplace! (...although Judy did try to scrape a nickel off me when I came up once...) Instead, Communion looks a whole lot more like a wedding. We're in a church, we walk down the aisles together, stand in front of a minister, and become one flesh with the bread—literally—we eat the bread and it becomes our flesh. And we know what the distribution system is like at a wedding.

My best friend from high school is getting married this summer, I just got an invitation in the mail, and I already know exactly what gift I'm going to bring. One year as a joke for his fiancée's birthday, we bought her a hideous package of twigs and dirt, wrapped in crumpled newspaper and duct tape, that if planted would grow into a rose bush. She planted it, and over the years it has turned into a huge, beautiful plant that blooms with roses every spring. After I arrive at the wedding and drop off my gift on the banquet table piled in gifts, I will begin receiving gifts in abundance: the joy of the great celebration, years of friendship, delicious food, and plenty of wine—none of which I will be charged for, because weddings have a different kind of distribution system. I do not think it is a coincidence that Jesus was at a wedding in Cana in the story just before the one we read today.

Turning back to our service, after we partake of Communion together, our wedding feast of redemption, we will see that the body of Christ has been relocated yet again. The bread will be gone!—but not really, it will just be inside of us. At that point, the locus of God's presence on earth will be in you and the people around you.

With all this talk about the presence of God, I want to read a little bit from Abraham Joshua Heschel (he was a Jewish theological professor). In his book, The Prophets, he talks about the experience of sacrifice in the Temple: “[it is] unmistakably holy; a spirituality that had both form and substance, that was concrete and inspiring, an atmosphere overwhelming the believer—pageantry, scenery, mystery, spectacle, fragrance, song, and exaltation... It is hard for us to imagine what entering a sanctuary or offering a sacrifice meant to ancient man. The sanctuary was holiness in perpetuity, a miracle in continuity the divine was mirrored in the air, sowing blessing, closing gaps

between the here and the beyond. In offering a sacrifice, man mingled with mystery, [and] reached the summit of significance...”

Jesus is teaching us that this summit of significance is everywhere we go—not just in the Temple. He soon says to the Samaritan woman, *Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.* He’s telling us that the Father’s house, the place where we experience “pageantry, scenery, mystery, and song” is everywhere! But it’s terribly hard to see when we turn every place into a marketplace.

This reminds me of one of my favorite pieces of writing, a letter written by Native American Chief Seattle in 1852 in response to the U.S. government seeking to buy the Tribal lands: “The president in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people. We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers [this sounds a lot like St. Francis!]. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man, all belong to the same family...As we are part of the land, you too are part of the land. This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know: there is one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We *are* brothers after all.”

The locus of God’s presence on earth is everywhere, and we see in worship that it is especially present in a particular kind of story, in food that is broken and shared, and in one another. You are the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is the new distribution system. Therefore, you are also the new distribution system—which is a hard thing, but not a bad thing.

It is hard because it requires you to figure out how to live your life more like a wedding and less like a marketplace. Unfortunately, we have spent our entire lives being conditioned to live in a marketplace, so we have a lot of work to do. It’s best to start small, so in concluding this sermon I will limit myself simply to reimagining only the very next place I will go today, potluck.

You know, I have never brought a dish to potluck. The past couple years I’ve slid into the role of “poor college student who shows up to be fed by the wealthier grown-ups.” This role was established on the strong foundation of my general laziness that prevents me from wanting to run to the store or try to remember which Sunday of the month it is. So if I’m going to imagine potluck as a wedding, I’m going to have to overcome that laziness and go get a gift that I’d be excited about sharing, like I’m excited about giving my friends another hideous rose-twig package.

It would also be good to pay attention to what Jesus did when he was at the wedding in Cana (namely, that when the wine ran out, he went and got more—and everybody

thought it was a miracle). Sometimes at potluck I'll look at the counter and think, "There's no way that's enough food for everyone." But then I'll look at the counter a few minutes later and two buckets of fried chicken will have miraculously appeared!

Rick likes to say that the miracle at Cana is not the water being turned into wine, but that the new wine is better than the old. I think that's what is so miraculous about the fried chicken. I want it more than anything else on the table! If we were running out of food and bologna sandwiches showed up, it would definitely not seem miraculous. But when the food is running out, and something mouth-watering appears, it is as if Jesus has been here, and indeed he has.

Anyway, that's enough talking for me. I'm getting dangerously close to becoming the groomsman who embarrassingly overdoes the toast.