

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 7, 2021

Doing the Church's Business

John 2:13-22

Earlier this week, our church's secretary came here into the sanctuary, removed the envelopes for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, and replaced them with the envelopes for the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. This behind-the-scenes ritual usually takes place in early to mid March. It's part of how we shift our focus from international missions to North American missions. We get a fresh batch of posters, prayer guides, offering envelopes, and videos. But otherwise, the plan is largely the same. Remember and hear from those who are planting and cultivating the church and making disciples, pray for them, and contribute financially to what God is doing through them. This is an annual phase in our congregation's life together. Just as you can count on some daffodils popping up along the edge of our building, you can count on the Annie Armstrong emphasis sprouting forth in our worship gatherings.

That's just one of many things you can count on in the life of our congregation. In fact, as I emphasized in my sermon two Sundays ago, this church, like all churches, is sustained and formed by repetition. We return to certain disciplines, practices, programs, and projects, over and over again, as a way of giving ourselves to God and being shaped into the kind of people that he wants us to be through Christ. We need this structure, this routine, this rhythm, in order to live more fully into our covenant relationship with the Lord.

But with rhythm comes risk. The things that help us retell the story of God's saving deeds and that help us participate in what God is doing in the world can themselves become the focus of our faith, more than the Lord himself. We can begin to give more authority and devotion to our routines and rituals than we do to the one who has called us and commissioned us.

In today's text from John, Jesus disrupts business as usual at the temple. During Passover, one of the most sacred festivals on the religious calendar, Jesus shows up and issues a challenge to the institution at the very center of Israel's life and faith. He throws the mechanics of temple worship into chaos. Remember that these worshipers have come to this place to recall God's deliverance, and to make their tithes and offerings. This is when and where and how they express their gratitude and devotion to the Lord. They're just doing what they've done many times before. Only this time Jesus arrives and starts turning things upside down, literally.

He flips over tables where currency is being exchanged. He braids a whip out of cords and starts chasing the worshipers and their animals out of the vestibule and into the parking lot. It's not as if these creatures are polluting God's house with their noises and smells. On the contrary, cattle, sheep, and doves are required for burnt offerings. If you're a pilgrim traveling a long distance to worship, it's too hard to lug a bunch of animals with you. You're better off buying them when you arrive in Jerusalem so you can participate in the temple services. And when you pay your temple tax, you can't use your Greek or Roman coins that have a picture of the emperor's head on them, so you convert them into the legal currency

in Jerusalem. All in all, if God's people are going to keep their house of worship open and hold services, the sale of animals and the changing of money are necessary. These are just essential parts of how a religious institution does business. There have to be programs, policies, and structures in place that enable and facilitate what God's people are called to be and to do.

During COVID-19, we've gotten a renewed sense of how much routines and structure matter in the life of a church. About a year ago, when things were first beginning to shut down, it was such a strange and disruptive experience to have our place of worship closed. We couldn't gather to offer praise and thanks to the Lord together. We couldn't study the Scriptures together. We couldn't fellowship together. We couldn't eat together. This place that was so central to our identity and mission, this place where we had assembled, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, was suddenly inaccessible to us.

And along with the closing of our house of worship came other questions that suddenly needed to be addressed. What electronic resources do we have in place, including our church website, through which we can connect, communicate, and worship? What avenues do we have for people to continue to make their tithes and offerings to the church? Which bills have arrived in the mail and what is our treasurer's system for paying them? Are there particular needs that the Buildings and Grounds Committee should address, now that our facility is closed indefinitely? How will we handle the closing of the day care center? What about the church's business meetings? How will we process our congregational decision-making during this period of lockdown?

Our pandemic journey has reminded us of how the physical and organizational infrastructure of our church is critical. When I was in seminary, they didn't offer any courses on how to pastor a congregation that can't congregate. So you and I have spent a lot of the last year learning as we go, navigating our way through circumstances we've never faced. All the while, we've been reminded that the administrative piece of being a church is essential. Congregational structure helps us endure and be effective. A church is more than just an institution, but it still has to be institutional. The machinery of church life has to keep running.

The key is not placing the machinery of church life above Jesus Christ himself. In today's text, Jesus offers a radical challenge to the religious institutions of his day. He confronts the temple machinery that has become so routine and entrenched that it's now closed off to fresh and new ways God is at work revealing himself. And so today, the risen Lord challenges us about those times and ways when we take the authority of our religious institutions and equate that with the presence of God.

"Look at this," says Jesus to the worshipers in the temple. "How dare you turn my Father's house into an emporium." This is just business as usual. The religious machinery is running smoothly, all the while unaware that God is present and moving in a new way. That's why Jesus challenges the authority of the temple in a way that quite literally shakes its foundations. "Destroy this sanctuary," says Jesus (v. 19). "Knock it all down, take it apart, haul the debris over to the county landfill, and in three days I'll raise this house of worship again."

His brothers and sisters in the faith are understandably confused and upset. "This sanctuary has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?!" That's when John, as he sometimes does, leans in to explain what Jesus is talking about. "He's referring to the temple of his body." So Jesus' body itself is the sanctuary of God's presence. He himself is the location of God's glory rather than the temple building.

Go back to the opening chapter of John's Gospel, where he has told us that Jesus is how "the Word became flesh" (1:14). Jesus is the embodiment of God, enabling us to see God's glory. And after hearing today's text, jump ahead a couple of chapters to Jesus' conversation at the well with the Samaritan woman. The most pressing theological problem standing between the Samaritans and the Jews was where you should worship. The Samaritans believed it was Mount Gerizim. The Jews believed it was Jerusalem. But Jesus says that the time is coming—in fact, it has already arrived—when worship is no longer defined by place, but as worship "in spirit and truth" (4:23), which means worship that reflects and is shaped by the character of God. Jesus himself is now the location of God's presence, the site of glory, the place to worship.

These days, under pandemic circumstances, I realize that "going to church" means different things to different people. For some, going to church means traveling here to this sanctuary where we gather. For some, going to church means opening a laptop and participating in a livestream service. For some, going to church means opening an app and listening to the sermon on your phone. For some, going to church means turning on the TV and watching another preacher teach from the word of God. Just as the risen Jesus isn't confined to a particular time and place, so our options for meeting him remain open as well. The bottom line is that coming to church means coming to Jesus.

While that includes a personal experience of Jesus and a personal relationship with Jesus, it's more than just personal. It's also corporate. It's community. Jesus is the location of God's presence, the site of God's glory. But where is Jesus? He's primarily present in the community of his people. In other words, Jesus is in church, not as the building, but as the assembly of his followers.

If Jesus is in church, that means he can still be disrupting us from within. Jesus challenges us about those times and ways when we value our church as an institution more than we value his presence. Jesus challenges us about those times and ways when we make our programs, our policies, our building, or our activities the focus of attention, rather Jesus himself. Jesus challenges us about those times and ways when we settle for just keeping the machinery of the church running, rather than opening ourselves to fresh vision and spiritual renovation. Jesus challenges us about those times and ways when we would rather hold on to what we've got, or just get back what we had, rather than letting him take what's dead and raise it up into something new.

Here in the present, and going forward, we'll continue to learn more about what it means to do the church's business. The fact is, we need the structure, the organization, the administration that helps us function during tough times. We need the rhythms, routines, and rituals that reinforce our sense of identity and purpose. But more than anything, we need Jesus himself. We need to beware of taking our church as an institution and equating that with the power and presence of God. Instead, we need to make sure that Jesus remains the focus of all our activity. We need to stay under his authority. We need to stay open to his call and his challenge, so that as the church's business gets done, Jesus' business gets done.