

John 2:13-22

Third Sunday in Lent

March 3, 1991

Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving, what you have first given us.

Sound familiar? Some of you have prayed that prayer more than a hundred times, more than thirty times last year alone. With joy and thanksgiving we offer.

Could have fooled me. The few Sundays every year that I sit where you now sit, my heart is not usually full of joy and thanksgiving as the plates are being passed. Should I put in a five or a ten, I ask myself. Since we are on vacation I think of the offering that we will need to make up when we get home. I think of what they are going to use the offering for, I think of what we owe them for providing word and sacrament for us that day. But it is not joy and thanksgiving that are in my mind and heart, just the offering.

The prayer is a nice prayer, I'm just not sure it connects up very well with what's really going on.

~~Once~~ <sup>When they entered the promised land</sup> When the people of Israel were wandering in the Sinai desert, the Almighty God commanded offerings for them. Lambs and calves and bulls and goats and pigeons and doves, For sin, for ~~cleansing~~, for uncleanness, in gratitude for harvest, as a remembrance of the passover, the people were to offer these animals on which their life depended as a gift to God. They offered the very best, unblemished lambs, first fruits from their fields and orchards.

It is not hard to imagine how God hoped it would work out. I am a peasant farmer, the rains come, the grass grows, my sheep have lambs, my wheat yields sufficiently that my family will be fed. I know that I did not bring the rains, the sunshine, the growth to pasture and field. I know that these all come from the hand of God. In profound gratitude and thanks

I bring the very best to my Lord, an act that is for me a joy. I give my offerings in love.

So it might have been once in Israel. But by 27 or 28 AD, the world had changed. Not peasant farmers traveling a short distance, but city dwellers coming from all over the world to Jerusalem for Passover. The commanded offerings were purchased, an obligation was taken care of. Doing duty had replaced worship, The forms were all correctly observed, but the substance of the practice had been lost.

Jesus saw the sellers of oxen and sheep and pigeons and the moneychangers, providing proper coins for the temple tax. Everything was wrong, for they were promoting only the outward observances. Jesus made a whip of cords and drove them all with the sheep and oxen out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these away, you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade."

If Jesus were walking among us today, would he come in here and tear the page out of our hymnal that says, "we offer with joy and thanksgiving.." Or would he grab the plates from the acolytes and fling them. Would he say, No more. You take what could be worship and make it into paying the bills, keeping the place afloat, no joy, no thanksgiving, only obligation. you follow the outward forms, but without the inward substance.

During that passover so long ago, I am sure that the people all around Jesus got every word right, every gesture done with precision, but hearts were not right. We can say the words, We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us, But if our offering is not given in profound gratitude then our prayer is a mockery.

Give us peace, Lord. Give us peace, Lord, give us peace Lord, we have prayed. But when the headlines read, Ceasefire, did we thank God, or the Marines.

We are no better than the people Jesus drove from the temple so long ago. Honoring God with our lips while our hearts are far from him. Figuring percentages that we owe him in offering as if our place in the kingdom can be purchased.

The people in the temple asked Jesus, what sign do you have for disrupting the way we do things here. And Jesus answered, Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

John tells us that Jesus spoke of the temple of his body.

Death would tear him down, but on the third day he would rise again.

God's answer to the abuse of worship was not to give more rules. He did not think that education or instruction could create clean hearts and renew right spirits within his people. God's answer was the dying and rising of Jesus Christ.

Not our offerings, but God's offering will make his people holy. Not lambs from our flocks, but the lamb who God provides will take away our sin. Not our sincerity, or enthusiasm, not even our joy and thanksgiving, but the dying and the rising of Jesus Christ is the foundation of our hope. If we find no joy in him, no cause for thanksgiving in him, then we simply haven't heard yet, believed yet. Then no rituals, no learnings, no giving on our part means anything.

But when you know that Christ has died for you, been raised for you, then all the rest will take care of itself. Rules and rituals, take them or leave them, our joy is in Christ.

*the truth is  
death nothing  
in all  
creation  
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