

Lent 3B 2018, March 4, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

It's been a good day for business at Mega-Bank, USA. The latest government reports show housing values on the rise by double digit points for the fourth quarter in a row. Lots of folks are streaming through the doors wanting to buy their first home, or move up to a bigger home, or take out a home equity loan worth three times as much as it was when they bought in four years ago. These are great days for bankers. They write the loans as fast as people apply for them. The background check process streamlined so that most loans can be awarded as the clients are sitting at the desk. Those taking out loans can't believe their good fortune. The rates are so reasonable and the monthly payments well within their ability to pay. Of course, most of them don't realize how much those payments will increase in a few years or the risk of what might happen if the values of their homes might fall. The lender doesn't care. After all it's not his responsibility to explain everything. That's why there's lots and lots of fine print on the application. Don't worry about all that. Just sign here and you'll be in your new home next week.

The commotion starts in the lobby. Shouting and turning over tables and chairs. "This bank is corrupt from the president on down to every loan officer here. Get out, and quit exploiting the poor." A wild-eyed man runs back and forth shoving and pushing every teller, every bank officer out of the way. People are running for the door. Finally the vice-president of mortgage loans steps in and says, "Wait a minute. What give you the right to come in here and upset our business? We're not doing anything wrong." And the wild prophet says, "You are stealing from the poor. Just you wait. I'm going to become president of this bank someday and then I'll clean up this mess you've created. I'll lend money fairly and not charge the poor exorbitant prices like you are."

To be sure, this little story can only partly parallel the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple, but it does come close. It was sudden, swift, and dramatic. What Jesus did in the Temple was a unique event, a response to a particular set of circumstances. But the violence, and the way it upset those in charge, would be just as strong as if someone came and shook up corrupt lending practices in a huge, impersonal bank that was only concerned with its bottom line and not the well-being of its customers.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the heartbeat of the Jewish people, including Jesus. It wasn't like any other church or synagogue, not matter how big. The Temple was the center of the religious, political, social and economic life of the nation. It was more important than a church in the center of town. It was more important than city hall, or the bank or the market or the university, or even the sum of all those put together. The Temple was God's dwelling place. Holy. Sacred. In a nation where faith and politics and business and learning were all rolled into one the Temple stood at the center.

But, like all institutions both divine and human, sacred and secular, it was subject to its own sort of corruption. Those who were supposed to watch over the day to day operations were in the back pocket of those exploiting the poor. The checks and balances meant to keep in check the leaders utterly failed. Deregulation of the financial and governmental agencies led to corruption from the top on down. That's what got Jesus so riled up in the Temple. Those who were supposed to keep watch over the Temple practices were either asleep on the job or, worse yet, in collusion with those exploiting the poor.

Those who read John's gospel would have known the practices which led to Jesus' outburst of violence. But it may seem strange to us. So a bit of background. The Temple, as I said, was the center of Jewish religious life. Each year, at the Passover, thousands of pilgrims

converged on the city. And once a year every Jew was required to pay the Temple tax, a holy obligation. The tax, however, had to be paid in what was known as a sanctuary shekel. The problem was most everyone used the common currency for everyday transactions; money that was issued by the Roman government. Foreign money was deemed impure for the temple tax. So, in the courtyard of the Temple moneychangers set up their tables to accommodate these out of town pilgrims, exchanging impure foreign coins for the pure sanctuary shekel. And, as you might guess, here there was much predatory lending and exchange. Exorbitant rates of interest were charged to poor Jews just trying to fulfill their religious obligation. The same situation existed with those who sold the animals offered in sacrifice. If a pilgrim tried to bring their own dove, or sheep with them to sacrifice it was often rejected as blemished and therefore unfit. "But of course, over here we have some fine doves and sheep well qualified for sacrifice." The price, however, was much greater than the value of a comparable animal in the market.

The corruption of the market around the Temple drove Jesus to drive out those who exploited the poor and the pilgrims who just wanted to offer their sacrifices to God. There doesn't seem to be any explicit rejection of the Temple sacrifices as such. But when asked about his violent behavior Jesus responds strangely and mysteriously. "Tear down this Temple and in three days I will build it up." Of course no one knew what he meant. They took him literally, protesting about how long the Temple had been under construction. It wasn't until after he had been raised from the dead his disciples remembered these words and said, "But of course. He wasn't speaking literally of the actual building, but of his own body."

The death and resurrection of Jesus raises him to be our dwelling place, our temple. We, who are baptized, are "in Christ," as Paul will say. We are members of the Body of Christ, in both senses of that word. We are members in the sense of belonging to a community, an organization. And we are members like Paul means it, individual parts of a larger whole.

But that's only one aspect of Christ's body as the new Temple of God. The Temple in Jerusalem was the place where Israel encountered God. Now, Jesus is the new Temple in which the whole world is invited to encounter the living God. No other temple of human construction can fulfill the promise of meeting and receiving God.

This particularity of Jesus as the one true Temple of God will create roadblocks and difficulties. Paul comes right out and says it. The death and resurrection of Jesus is stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. This is hard for modern ears to hear, as well. Many people want to believe in a god who isn't tied too closely to such a particular place and time. But a general and generic kind of god is also a god who can be manipulated to suit our own desires. That's not the God of the Bible, however. God is always bound to specifics; a specific people and a specific Word, the nation of Israel and commandments given to guide their life as a people, and a specific Jew from that nation, Jesus, whose death and resurrection raises him to be the Temple in which we dwell. To those who hear and begin to believe this message is the very salvation of God.

All are invited to enter into the Temple of God that is the Body of Christ. No one is to be shut out, no one is to be excluded. The entrance to the Temple is through the cleaning waters of Baptism and those who dwell here do so by faith. Their eyes are fixed upon the cross and their hope is grounded in the promises of Jesus Christ. Amen.