

-There was a lovely woman in the parish that I served as a volunteer in inner-city London by the name of Robin. Robin was an eccentric woman who came to almost every single church event. She played flute for worship, made coffee/tea, baked, and took care of the flower garden around the church. She was fascinated by art and talked a lot about various paintings, sculptures, and artwork that she ran across. One thing that Robin also talked quite a lot about was her mom. Her mom had passed away suddenly from a heart attack about 10 years before and Robin still currently lived in her old flat which was a couple blocks away from church. I went over to this flat for tea with Robin one day and was pretty blown away by what I saw. Books, magazines, and paperwork filled the apartment almost up to the ceiling. Even the fireplace was overflowing with what I later found out were her mom's old medical records. There was a narrow isle-like passageway into the living room where we sat with two chairs. The chairs were so close together, when Robin came with the tea and biscuits she climbed in and we were literally touching each other's knees. During our visit Robin talked of how most of the things in the apartment were her mom's that she had to keep there because she couldn't afford the storage unit anymore. "It's hard to think about getting rid of it," she acknowledged to me. "I just don't want to not have it."

-Perhaps you have run into, have friends, or even have a tendency yourself to hang onto things in memory of a loved one for too long. Even though Robin is the extreme, we all, I think, have hung onto stuff longer than maybe we should in order to encounter our loved ones again. For some reason, it becomes incredibly difficult to imagine having a connection with family and loved ones outside of stuff. This problem became so evident for Robin, it hindered her life and her space. It made our tea and biscuits together memorable, but I wouldn't go so far as to say enjoyable for me.

-It's easy to get ahead of ourselves, I think, and believe we know the meaning of a bible story because we have heard it thousands of times before. This, I believe, is one of those stories: Jesus and the moneychangers. It's relatively simple right? Jesus gets mad because they are exchanging money in the Temple (God's house). So as an expression of this anger, he does a "throw down": turns over the money tables and even (in the Gospel of John) gets a whip! How convenient for our Hollywood CGI filmmakers. -"Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Jesus yells.

-The problem I have found with the "I know the gist of this story because I have heard it 1000 times" mentality is that we usually get the gist of the story wrong. The "gist" of this story many of us have grown up with (including myself) was the thinking that Jesus is angry at the money marketplace. Money is what is wrong here, they can't sell stuff in the house of God.

-But is this really what Jesus is angry about?

-In terms of “wrong-doing”, this story is incredibly odd because there really isn’t any going on here. I know I have explained this before in bible study, but let me do it again quickly here. These “merchants” which this gospel story is talking about are not merchants like you would run into at a Lady Griz Basketball game. Say I am a farmer from Galilee, and like any good Jew I would make a journey to the Temple once a year for passover to offer a sacrifice to God. The problem I would have, as a farmer in Galilee, is that it would take me 5 days to walk from my farm to Jerusalem. Now, think of Denny Iverson, walking his best, most prized cow to offer as a sacrifice to God for 5 days straight. It’s not like you can take a bunch of stuff to keep that cow/lamb fed, right? So what is that best looking animal going to look like after walking in the heat of the Palestine desert for 5 days straight? Not the best. So these temple merchants served a purpose: allowing me to purchase a prized animal at the temple so I can offer my sacrifice. Similarly, as a farmer from Galilee in Jesus’ time, I am carrying Roman coin which has the head of Caesar on it. Carrying the head of Cesar around in the temple of God is not good, so moneychangers would be available to purposefully change my Roman coin into a special Temple coin that did not have the head of Caesar. Needless to say, this system served a purpose. Yet, Jesus has another purpose.

-“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body.” Jesus is angry not at the “moneychangers”, but at a Temple system that elevates some and keeps others out.

-Many of you have maybe heard about “The Message” translation, a paraphrase translation by Eugene Peterson. I love how he has interpreted some hard to understand verses. One of my favorites is how he writes John 1:14 “the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” A new temple has moved into the neighborhood: Jesus. This temple is not bound by walls or buildings, but out of love. This story, I believe, is not about the money. It’s about a new Temple system that has taken hold. Jesus’ body: the living Temple, open to all. This new Temple is what our church is called to share with every person that we can.

-This sounds so awesome doesn’t it? Everyone says “the church is not the building, it’s the people”, but is it so easy? Take a look around here for instance: We got all of these windows, all of which multiple people in this room gave as gifts to our church. We have this cross which was crafted by Doris Paulsen and Bill Ruck’s father. We have the painting of Jesus on water from the old white church in the narthex. Our Bell Tower committee has submitted its final design for a new tower. Of course, we have the whole church addition built by Adrian and many of the Men’s Breakfast folks as well as designed by our own Warren Hampton. All of these things connect in a powerful way to this space and I betcha if I or anyone else came in here and said: you know, we need to move. We gotta go somewhere else. Let’s sell the church and move somewhere else.

You would run me out of this place, right? Let me be clear: I am not suggesting me move, so let's kill that one right away. I'm also not saying these things are NOT important because they are. They are part of our church community. But, maybe what Jesus is trying to get at is: how do we make sure that we don't slip into our building turning into a "house of market" versus a "house of god"? Are there parts of our building that we hold onto like old medical records of a dead loved one in the fireplace that maybe prevent others from witnessing the radical Temple of Christ?

-Our conversation on discipleship continues during this Lenten season and Mike Mosely said something in his talk this last Wednesday that I can't seem to shake: our church is like a living prayer quilt of disciples. I love this because it is an image of expansion, not isolation. When we hold onto the blessed threadwork of a prayer quilt, that sacred item hopefully expands us into a new love, courage, and devotion to our God. This is much different than holding onto medical records of a dead loved one or the stones of a grand temple. One serves to open us up, and one serves to close us off.

-So let me end with this: how do your things open you up more as disciples of God? How does our church building open us up to be deeper witnesses of the gospel? May this church continue to be a prayer quilt to all who enter and inspire all of us to, not hoard and close off, but to instead deepen our faith and service in the name of the living Temple of God: Jesus the Christ. Amen.