

Sermon – March 7, 2021
“Money Changer”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 2:13-22

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word for us today.

Samuel, good morning to you. David, it is good to see you again this morning. How are you, Jacob? How is your family? It is good to be among the friends that I have made who have space in the temple to exchange coins. This is the great week for us, the busiest week of the year. This week we will all make enough money to live well for the rest of the year. This is the week of Passover, when Jews from all over the world come to Jerusalem to the temple to worship the one true God. It is a great gift to be part of this exciting festival in Jerusalem. I like how they come from all over the country of Israel and from all of the countries where the Jews live to worship God in this place. They come as young, single men just beginning life. They come as fathers with their families. And they come as old men, some supported on the arms of a son, all for the same reasons, to pay the half shekel of the temple tax and to celebrate the Passover with a sacrifice. For some, this is a yearly trip and they know the temple system and how to get the correct coin for the temple tax and where to purchase their animal for a sacrifice. You see, our oral law that the Rabbis have given from their reading of the Law that Moses wrote down for us tells us that only the coin of the temple can be used for payment of the temple tax; only those coins are known to contain the correct amount of silver required by the law. Those who come from faraway lands need to have the correct coin so that they can meet their obligation and pay the tax. It is my job, and the job of all of the money changers, to make sure that those seeking to pay the tax have the correct amount. And while we do charge a fee for our service, we fairly weigh their coins to exchange them for the half shekel of silver they will need. And so, we provide this service to those who come to the temple to worship. Passover is the big week. During this week some two million people will come to the temple, and we are blessed to exchange their coins and help them meet their obligation. I used to rent a small space on the

street that led to the main gate from a shopkeeper who had a shop there. It was a good place as many people heading into the temple did pass by that gate. But since Caiaphas the high priest came, he has allowed us to be in the temple itself, and now many more people come to my table. I have never been comfortable with this new arrangement as the temple has always seemed to me a place where business should not be conducted. But since the high priest has argued this new arrangement with the Sanhedrin and allows us to be in the temple, the only way for me to make money is to pay their fee and set up my table with the others in the temple. I don't think that any of the money changers are comfortable with this arrangement, as the temple seems to us like it should be for worship, prayer, instruction, and pious sacrifice, but if we want to do business now, we must pay the required fee to the religious authorities and then set up our tables here in the temple.

Speaking of sacrifice, I can't help but think of my friends who sell the animals for sacrifice. They also have been brought into the temple by the high priest and allowed to sell their animals here in this place. They have brought in the bulls, sheep, and doves that people buy for their sacrifice for Passover. Last year, my friend Amos, one of the sheep brokers, told me that all of the sheep sold for Passover alone numbered more than 250,000. Those who sell animals are also now doing a great business in the temple. Before, they held their animals outside the city in the large pens and those who came to Jerusalem and wanted to buy an animal for sacrifice would go there to purchase an animal to bring into the temple for the priests to sacrifice. Now, the brokers are constantly bringing into the temple more animals throughout the day to keep up with the demand. The presence of animals makes for a lot of noise and excitement, especially when one of the bulls breaks away and runs around the temple until they can catch and re-pen it. They also have to deal with all that comes with keeping animals in pens in the temple. They have loads of manure to take out, and feed and water to bring in, yet they too have to be here if they want to compete for the business of those seeking sacrifice. Very few people will buy an animal to bring into the temple for sacrifice when others have them ready here in the temple to sell. So, they too almost have to be here to do enough business to meet their costs. Because of the brokers' animals and our presence, much of the character of the temple has changed. It is a messy, noisy, disruptive place with long lines of people waiting to exchange coins and make purchases.

I do like to see all of these Jews come to the temple and worship. There is something wonderful and holy about this week, this week when we remember what God once did for Israel, when God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt with a strong arm and a mighty hand. I look each day at those who come here to worship. There are the poor who have barely enough money to sustain them, yet they come and watch carefully as I weigh out the silver for the half shekel, and then they go and purchase doves for their sacrifice. They may struggle with their finances, but they come to worship. Then there are the rich, some who may not have been to the temple for many years, who have come once from a faraway place. They have made a once-in-their-life trip to the temple to worship God. They often are the best customers as they need to pay the temple tax for the many years that they have not been able to come, and they are often extravagant in their business dealings.

And so, this day has begun like they all have since the high priest moved us into the temple. The lines form early and as I look up from my table, I can see my own line growing in numbers, stretching many people deep into the temple court. Behind them I can also see the lines forming for those waiting to buy animals. It looks like another very busy day is starting in the temple, a day just like all of the others this week of the Passover. I take one last look across the way to see how things are going with the animals. What is that going on over there? I can see some animals running from their pens across the temple. I always stop to watch when the animals get loose, just in case one were to come my way. I want to be ready to gather up all of my gear and coins so that they are not scattered if the loose animal were to come my way and overturn my table. I guess that is just another loose animal. I hope they catch it soon. Wait, it looks like now several of them are loose; there seem to be lots of animals, sheep, and cattle running towards one of the gates. Maybe I should stop working and keep an eye on what is happening. It looks like some of the others are doing the same. Jacob, can you see what is happening? How about you, Amos? You have the sharpest eyes among us. Can you see anything? I think I see what is happening. It looks like there is a man with what looks like a whip of ropes driving out the animals. He is the one causing this disruption. He is actually driving out all of the sheep and bulls. This is going to create a mess for the animal brokers. There they go, trying to catch their animals. Now he is headed for those who sell the doves. I hope he doesn't break open their cages; their owners will never get them back if they fly away. Now he is yelling at the dove keepers to get their doves out of the temple and to stop making his Father's

house a marketplace. They are packing up and leaving. I can't believe what I am seeing. This man has driven all of the animals out of the temple courts. What started with just a few running animals quickly has grown to be all of the animals running through the temple and out the gate, while being chased or carried by their owners. Wait, it looks like the man is coming this way. Yes, he is headed to the money changers' row. What is he doing? It looks like he is headed towards Eli's table on the far end of the line. Wonder what he wants? Does he need to change coins so he can pay the temple tax? Did you see that? He didn't stop to wait in line; he went right to the front. A line breaker in the temple! That is not very respectful. And now he is pouring out the coins and scattering all that has been collected Oh no, he just turned over Eli's table. He is moving to the next table and pouring out Noah's coins. Oh no, there goes his table as well. I am not staying around for this and let my coins and silver be scattered and my scale get thrown down. I am out of here. Maybe I can hide in the crowd and among the colonnades until the temple police stop this. Why is it taking them so long to get here?

Who is this man and how does he dare to defy the high priest who set up this business arrangement? Oh my, it looks like he got to Amos before he could move. There go his coins, over goes the table. There goes my table. Good thing I was prepared to leave. I feel bad for my friends as they search for their coins that are rolling around on the temple floor. I don't know how they will ever straighten this mess out. Where are the religious authorities? Where are the temple police? Why does no one stop this man? He seems to be moving on now.

Here come the religious authorities from the high priest at last. I think I will stay here and see what they have to say to this man. They seem to know him? Yet they don't ask him why he did this? Don't they care that this business arrangement has been ruined? Why are they talking with him and not arresting him? They just called him by name, Jesus. They do know him. They did not ask him why he did this and they know him. Why are they letting him do this? They just asked Jesus for a sign to prove that he has the authority to clean the temple of the business, to drive us who are buying and selling under the authority of the high priest out of the temple, the temple which he just called his Father's house. The religious authorities are not taking issue with Jesus calling the temple his Father's house; instead, they want a sign from God that justifies his actions of cleaning out the commerce that was set up here. Now let me hear what he has to say about this sign. I would like to see a sign from heaven that would justify all of this disruption. What was that he just said? He did not offer them what I thought would be a sign, an act that

only God could do to prove he had authority over them to regulate the temple. He told them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Now those are strange words. This temple has been under construction for years, since before I was born, and he is going to build it by himself in three days? How could one man move so many large stones by himself or even complete the rebuild in three days with a large army of workers? The religious authorities seem to have a similar response as I have. They just told this Jesus, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” I don’t think they know what to say in answer to his strange words. They certainly are not going to tear down what has taken forty-six years to build to see if Jesus could build it back in three days. Especially with the Passover so near, there is just too much money to be made to try that. I am surprised that they did not ask Jesus about his comment about the temple being his Father’s house. That seems to me to be a bigger issue than their focus on the sign for his authority. His words make him equal to God. Is he? Is that why the religious authorities did not make Jesus stop when he cleared out the business in the temple? What if this is his Father’s house? What would that mean? The Jews are leaving Jesus alone and going off to discuss what to do about him. I don’t think it is wise to stay in the temple and try to do business with this Jesus loose in the temple. I am going to retrieve my table and head out to see if the shopkeeper will still rent me space to exchange coins for the temple tax. I don’t think it will be wise to try to do business in the temple for a while. Strange, I actually feel relieved that I am not going to be trying to conduct business in the temple. Maybe this Jesus is right about what the temple is for. Maybe it should be for worship, prayer, and the giving of sacrifices. I wonder, who is Jesus? What does he mean about this being his Father’s house? How could he claim to be God’s son? Why did the authorities not challenge him? Do they know that he really is God’s son? What are they going to do about him? This day that seemed to be like all other days of the Passover week is now a very strange, unsettling day indeed. I wonder what will happen to Jesus. I wonder what the religious authorities will do about this man.

Pray with me: Father, help me to see how I approach worship. Help me to strive to come to your temple to worship, pray, be instructed, and give pious sacrifices and not to make this place a market place. Open our hearts to anything we have made out of worship that takes the focus from you for ourselves and those around us. Give us hearts to worship you in spirit and truth. Amen

