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John 2:13-25
6th Message
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What do you think people in our culture first think about when they hear the word “religion?”

Religion in our culture doesn't have a very good reputation. In fact, I'd say that our area of the world probably ranks as having one of the lowest opinions of religion anywhere. A lot of people in our area believe that religion is outdated. Religion is restrictive. Religion doesn't help anymore.

I met a woman at a neighborhood event a few weeks ago and when I told her I was a pastor, her response was an incredulous, “Really?” She didn't say anything else, but I'm pretty sure she was thinking, “people still do that?”

There's actually a fair amount of people who view religion as the problem. After all, religious fundamentalists seem to be on the news all the time causing problems. Sometimes it's fighting each other in third world countries. Sometimes it is protesting something in a hateful manner. And sometimes it is simply believing something about family or sexuality or ethics that our culture is moving farther and farther away from.

Religion isn't very popular in our community these days.

This morning we are continuing our series on the Gospel of John called *Signs of Life*. We are in the middle of a ten month journey walking through this incredible book of Scripture and looking at how the life of Jesus is portrayed. We've been saying that this book presents Jesus as the source of life. That this author uses signs as a way of demonstrating that Jesus is the one who can bring life to the world.

But we have a problem. Jesus is a religious figure. We are a religion. At least that is how the rest of the world would understand it. And we've just said that religion has a terrible reputation. That a lot of people view religion as a problem, not as a solution. How can we say that Jesus is the source of life to the world when the world sees following Jesus as part of the problem?

This is part of the question that we will be addressing this morning. At the beginning of his ministry, this gospel portrays Jesus going immediately into the heart of the religious system of the day and literally shaking things up. He challenges the very heart of what it meant to be religious. We see Jesus begin his ministry with an effort at fixing religion.

We'll be looking at John 2:13–25. Today's story actually goes together with last week's story. In the passage previous, Jesus goes into the primary social event of the ancient world. He attended a wedding party. And he did something surprising there: he brought wine to the party and became the life of the party. Last week was a picture of Jesus entering common everyday social life and infusing it with a new kind of life.

This week, in a sense, Jesus does the opposite. Here he goes straight to the heart of religion. The Jewish temple was literally the center of what it meant to worship God. And he attacks it. He brings life to the party and he brings judgment to religion. This is not something that we would expect from a Jewish Messiah. We would expect him to criticize the culture and respect religion. But he does the opposite.

So what does this mean for us? We're not at a party this morning. We're at church. So as we see Jesus enter the temple and make some noise, our response cannot be “go, Jesus, go. Give it to those religious guys.” We are the religious guys. We can't escape this morning without being challenged. This passage is one that anyone who is part of any religious system needs to consider carefully. It asks very difficult questions about what we do, how we do it, how it is perceived by the world, and what the role of Jesus is in all of this.

We'll be looking at this story in three different movements. The first and the last will contain some kind of criticism of religion. The part in between will contain the answer: what religion—at least this religion—ought to be. So naturally we will want to be thinking about whether religion in our lives fits these aspects that Jesus is critical of or the aspect that he suggests. Does our religion need fixing?

Let's look at John 2:13-25 and find out.

Be the People of God

John 2:13-17:

¹³The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵And making a whip of cords, he drove

them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

The story begins with some context. It was the Passover. Faithful Jews would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover there, so that’s where Jesus went. That’s not such a small deal either. The previous story had Jesus at a wedding up in Cana of Galilee. Cana is almost as far north as you can get in Israel: almost 70 miles away from Jerusalem. That’s probably a 3-5 day trip. Our story begins with Jesus being faithful to the religious expectations of his day.

In John’s gospel, this is the first of three Passovers mentioned. The other gospels describe a similar event where Jesus clears the temple, but it’s described as being during the last week of his life. So there is a question as to whether this event happened once or twice. It’s possible that John is adjusting the chronology of some events for story-telling purposes. It does seem that the gospel authors did that at times.

But it’s also possible that Jesus did something similar in the temple twice. The language used is different in each account and it would seem that the purpose is different. I think the argument can go either way, but I think this was probably a separate incident from what happened in the other gospels.

So this story has Jesus coming into the temple and not being happy. He criticizes the religious institution in a dramatic and public way. But we need to figure out exactly what he is criticizing. Why is he upset with what is going on?

After all, the practice of buying sacrifices outside the temple was actually commanded in the Old Testament. When God’s people are told to go to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices, there is a policy for dealing with people who come a long way. Deuteronomy 14:24-26 instructs them to sell their sacrifice in their hometown, carry their money to Jerusalem, and buy a new sacrifice when they get to the temple.

So these people selling sacrifices were doing what needed to be done: offering sacrifices for people to buy. Then why did Jesus get mad?

Well, Jesus complains about his father’s house becoming a house of trade. He’s probably making reference to Zechariah 14. That chapter speaks of the great and terrible day of the Lord. It describes a day after judgment when

not just Jews, but all the nations will go up to Jerusalem to worship God. At the end of the passage, in the very last verse of Zechariah’s prophecy, it says, “there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.”

This passage that Jesus references gives us a clue as to why he’s mad. He is looking forward to a day when not just Jews, but the nations will worship YHWH. The text says that he found these people buying and selling in the temple. The temple had a lot of different parts to it. It was arranged in concentric circles according to who was allowed in each area. The outermost area was called the court of the Gentiles. That was as close as non-Jews could come within the temple. If there were sellers and money-changers in the temple, this was where they must have been. It’s impossible that they could have been in one of the inner courts.

So the one place within the temple where the nations are allowed to come looks like what? Walmart. There’s buying and selling and people changing money. It’s chaos.

Zechariah speaks of a time when the nations will come to worship God. Jesus gets to the temple and sees the nations in the temple not worshipping God, but buying and selling and changing money. They weren’t being drawn toward God in the court of the Gentiles. They were profiting from God’s people. This is why I think he got so mad.

The one part of YHWH worship that was open to the world looked just like everything in the world. It didn’t have anything to do with worship. Think about the court of the Gentiles as a kind of bridge between the world and the worship of YHWH. The purpose of that bridge is to give people a taste of what worshipping God is like. The purpose is for YHWH worship to flow outward from that connecting place into the world.

But the tide was flowing the wrong way. The things of the world: buying and selling and changing money were flowing into the temple from the world. The court of the Gentiles had become a way for the things of the world to make their way into worshipping God.

The result was that when the nations came to the temple, they didn’t see anything of God at all. When the nations came to what was supposed to be the unique earthly dwelling place of the omnipresent creator of the universe, what did they see? Financial opportunity. This place isn’t different than any other place. It’s just a different group of people to make money from.

It’s like the Bible joke: who was the greatest economist in the Bible? Pharaoh’s daughter, because she went to the bank and drew out a little prophet. Instead of finding prophets at the temple of YHWH, the nations were

making a profit.

That's why Jesus was mad. The buying and selling of sacrifices should have been done outside the temple. Somewhere where it wouldn't interfere with the purpose of the temple: demonstrating God to the world.

Jesus had a problem because religion stopped being about spirituality and started being about economics.

It's a good thing that's not true in America, isn't it?

Or is it? Of course, the exact opposite is true. In the eyes of the world, what is evangelical Christianity?

It is a market. A fairly affluent market that has shown great willingness to be cajoled into buying all sorts of stuff in the name of representing their faith.

It is a political constituency. A political group that is powerful and that must be taken into account if you are going to win any election. You have to know how to say what the evangelicals want to hear if you're going to be elected in this country.

It is an embarrassment. A prime example of how religious people talk about doing good and changing the world but only end up in sex scandals, money scandals, or lawsuits.

Does our world come to us to know God? Not for the most part. They come to sell us stuff, to earn our votes, and to laugh at us.

So what do we do about it? We don't have a court of the Gentiles to clear out. And we can hardly change the way that Christianity is perceived in America. We can't change the way that people think about us. But we can change the way that we think about ourselves. And that just might start to change the way we are perceived.

We are not a target demographic. We are not a political constituency. We are not victims of our culture or obligated to it. We are the people of God. That's how the Jews of Jesus day thought of themselves, but Jesus gets mad because they weren't acting like it. Are there ways that we need to act more like who we are? Ways that we need to be the people of God?

Last weekend I was in Santa Cruz on a young adult ministry team retreat. Early Sunday morning, I drove back up to this area to preach here at church. For me preaching requires two things: prayer and caffeine. I can pray on my own, but I stopped at Starbucks for the caffeine. As I was ordering my coffee, the barista asked me what I was doing that day. I told him I'm a pastor at a church in Palo Alto and I was on my way up there to preach.

First he asked me what side of Palo Alto our church was on. I told him the nicer side. So then he asked whether I leave out the part about the camel and the eye of the needle. If you don't know what he was referring to, he was talking about Jesus' comment that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. He just assumed I left that part out since I was preaching to a church in Palo Alto.

Of course I told him that we don't leave anything out. But isn't it interesting how we are perceived? Not how we'd like to be?

So how do we go about being the people of God? And in particular, how do we be the people of God in those places where we overlap with the rest of the world. Our version of the court of the Gentiles?

Well, for one—I'd challenge you to think about what your court of the Gentiles is. And which direction the tide flows. Do the values of the world crowd into it? Or does a picture of God emanate out?

One of the ways we are going to do this as a church is to take a Sunday off from worship at the beginning of next year. We have already started planning a church wide event in May of 2014. We're going to cancel our worship services and go out into the community to offer life. Our working title is *Life in Action* and we'll be going out from here to do practical service projects in our community. Part of our hope is to change the way that the church is perceived in our community.

We are not a market. We are not a political group. We are not a minority or an activist groups. We are a bridge to the authentic worship of YHWH. We need to act like one.

Be about Jesus

Jesus has just gone into the temple complex and claimed that the Jewish people weren't practicing their religion the way they were supposed to. This was actually not that unusual of a thing. There was a certain type of person who did this. They were called prophets. Jesus is acting like a prophet.

The Jews had a sort of system of checks and balances. The priests ran the religious institution. The prophets kept it accountable. They made sure the priests were acting like they were supposed to. So after Jesus comes in to town acting like a prophet, the priests have some questions for him.

John 2:18-22:

¹⁸So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹Jesus

answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, **“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?”** ²¹But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²²When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The response of the Jews is interesting. They don't argue with Jesus. They don't say, “hold on—we like the merchants where they are.” They aren't defensive about what Jesus is doing. But they want to know how he has the authority to correct them. Their question is something like “Who does this guy think he is?”

The way a prophet would validate themselves in ancient times was through a sign. You would know that a prophet spoke the truth and had the authority of God if he showed you a sign. Remember the signs that Moses performed before Pharaoh? Those signs demonstrated that he was an authentic prophet.

So the Jews say, “You're acting like a prophet. Show us a sign to prove that you're legit.” So Jesus does.

This is one of the classic scenes where Jesus gives an answer that totally confuses everyone. He starts talking about destroying the temple and raising it up again. Remember that he's standing within the temple and he's talking about a temple. So it's completely natural that everyone around him thought he was talking about the building that they were in.

Even the disciples didn't understand it until after he was raised from the dead. The passage says that he was talking about his body and the disciples realized this after his resurrection. That's when they put all the pieces together. That's when they understood. The Jews asked for a sign. He told them that their sign would be when they killed him and he came back.

But how does that prove that he's a prophet? How does that give him the authority to cleanse the temple?

What Jesus does is to “one-up” them. They are asking for a sign to demonstrate that he is a legitimate prophet. But he gives them something different. In effect, he's telling them, “I'm not a prophet here to reform your religion. I'm the Messiah here to replace it.”

The temple he was standing in actually was destroyed. It was destroyed around AD 70. Long after Jesus said these words, but before this gospel would have been written. So the temple was destroyed and he was raised from the dead.

Those two things go together. Jesus is saying two things

at the same time. The old is passing away. The temple will be destroyed. The new is already here. The new is me. You want to see whether I'm a prophet? Well, I'm not. I'm the Messiah. And my resurrection is going to take the place of your temple.

In the old days, if you wanted to know God, you came to the temple. Now, if you want to know God, you come to me. And the sign that you must believe in is my resurrection.

Jesus has criticized a religious system that didn't help people come to know God. Now he's telling them what does. He does. You want to fix religion? Get to know me. It's not about being religious. It's about Jesus. So if we are going to be the people of God, then there is one thing that we must be about. Jesus. Be about Jesus.

This is why the apostle Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 15:14, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” That's an incredible thing to say. If Christ's resurrection is false, then everything falls apart. My whole life is in vain. Our faith is worthless. Everything that we believe falls apart on the resurrection of Christ. That is the centerpiece of our faith.

That's what Jesus is saying. The temple used to be the center point of Jewish religion. Now it's Jesus. Now it's his resurrection.

The world thinks of us as religious people. That's fine. That's the only category they have. But that can't be how we think about ourselves. We can't think about ourselves as practicing a religion here. As doing the things that our religion requires. This is not about a system. It's not about a worldview. It's not about a set of ethics.

This is about Jesus. It's about a relationship with the man-who-is-God and experiencing relationship in the context of a community. Being part of the kingdom that Jesus is establishing. That's what we are doing. If we think of ourselves as a religion, that's all we have to offer the world.

But we are not about Christianity. We are about Jesus.

There are times when people talk to me about what I do or what it means to be a Christian. And I usually put it into the categories that the world understands. I counsel people. I preach. I plan. But I love how Jesus wasn't afraid to shatter people's categories. He wasn't afraid to tell people things that they couldn't quite understand. Why should they understand? What we're doing makes no sense apart from the resurrection of Jesus.

We can't be about religion. We need to be about Jesus.

Now, I know there are offensive and tacky and clichéd ways to “be about Jesus.” I'm not talking about those. Don't

worry. I'm talking about our lives and our worship and our faith centering itself on this person. Refusing to make anything else as important as this man-who-was-God and his resurrection from the dead. Jesus must be at the center.

Be in Need

So we've seen Jesus come into the temple and criticize things. He has implied that the Jewish religion has failed to offer life to the world in the way it is supposed to. Then he tells them that his resurrection will be the one thing that actually does offer life to the world.

This last passage is a bit difficult to understand. We hear about an odd sounding hesitation that Jesus has about trusting people. Let's see if we can figure out what's going on.

John 2:23-25:

²³Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

It starts out with some good news. Apparently, while Jesus was in Jerusalem, he did more signs than just cleansing the temple. And in response to these signs, many people believe in his name. It's the same phrase that is used in John 1:12, "to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." This is what we've been saying the whole book is about. John has written his gospel so that people may see the signs, believe in the name of Jesus and have life in his name.

This is great. We want people to believe in the name of Jesus. But then there is this strange phrase, "Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them." There is a word play going on here that is hard to see in English. The word translated "entrust" is the same word as "believe." A very literal translation would be something like "many trusted in his name when they saw the signs, but Jesus did not entrust himself to them."

Once again, we're left wondering as to what Jesus is being critical of. It was a bit hard to figure out what his problem with the temple was. But now it's even harder to figure out what his problem is here. What is behind Jesus' hesitancy? What does it mean that he didn't entrust himself to them?

Most of the commentators and preachers that I've read on this verse seem to think that Jesus is criticizing the faith of these people who believed in his name. That their faith

is only based on signs or that it is somehow a weak faith. That is certainly possible.

But it seems to me that John's whole goal is to get people to believe in Jesus on the basis of signs. Other gospels are critical of faith based on signs, but John really isn't. So I'm not convinced that something is wrong with the faith of these people.

I think what's going on is that Jesus is making a general comment about how faith in him works. It connects back to what he's said about the temple and about the role of religion in general.

People believe in Jesus. They follow him. They require testimony about him to understand who he is. But here, John points out that Jesus doesn't need the same thing. He doesn't need to believe in his disciples. He doesn't need any testimony about them to understand them. He already knows them.

I think what John is saying is that Jesus doesn't need us in the same way that we need him.

That could be obvious, but I'm not sure we always realize this. Sometimes I think we think that we are doing God a favor by believing in him. That God's self-esteem is really damaged by the fact that people have chosen to believe in him. And every time someone believes in him, it's almost as if he owes them something for the favor of their belief.

I think what Jesus is pointing out here goes back to the idea that what's going on here is not a normal religion. It's about Jesus who is the Son of God rising from the dead. And that makes everything different.

A religion needs people. If no one believes in Christianity, then Christianity will die. But God won't. If God is real and Jesus is who he claims to be, then God is God and Jesus is Lord whether or not you or I believe it.

Our God is God whether or not we believe in him. We simply believe in him. Not because he needs us but because we need him. We want things to be equal. We want to stand on equal footing with God. But that's not the way it works. We need God. Be in need.

Last summer there was a commencement address at a high school in Massachusetts that went viral because it captured something about our culture. The title of the speech was "You're not special." The speaker's goal was to convince these students that they were just like everyone else, so that they would have a better understanding of how the world works. Listen to some of his words,

*Contrary to what your u9 soccer trophy suggests,
your glowing seventh grade report card, despite every
assurance of a certain corpulent purple dinosaur,*

that nice Mister Rogers and your batty Aunt Sylvia, no matter how often your maternal caped crusader has swooped in to save you ... you're nothing special. (<http://theswellesleyreport.com/2012/06/wellesley-high-grads-told-youre-not-special/>)

We live in a culture that likes to tell us how incredibly valuable we are. How much we have to contribute to society and to the world. How critical our efforts and our energy is. A lot of that is true and helpful, but when we come to God, in particular, we need to remember that God is God and we are not.

We need to remember that God doesn't need us. That may sound mean. But it's not. It's actually what we need.

I think that we need to not be needed. Honestly, I don't want to believe in a God that needs my belief to feel good about himself. I don't want to believe in a God that is going to throw the towel in if I decide I don't believe in him. I want to believe in something—in someone—that is bigger than me, that was there before, that will be there forever and that is going to be there no matter what my response to him is.

If God needs me, then something is wrong.

My relationship with God is not a two way street. It's not a partnership of equals. I need him. He loves me, but he doesn't need me. I put my trust in him, but he doesn't put his trust in me.

Maybe this is why the Jews let the temple become a market place. They thought that God needed the business. They thought that God needed people to come to him. So they made the temple popular. It was filled with buzz.

But God doesn't need marketing. He doesn't care about his popularity. He doesn't need our attention or even our worship. The river flows outward. It flows from him to the world. Our goal is not to make him popular. Our goal is to receive and to respond. Not for his sake, but for ours.

We need God. The world needs God. When we remember that, it helps us do the rest of what we've been saying. Remembering our need helps to keep Jesus at the center. Remembering our need helps us to be the people of God. Remembering our need means that we go to Jesus as the source of life.

Receive him. Worship him. Just don't expect him to worship you back.

Conclusion

Last week Jesus came to a wedding party and filled it with life. This week he storms into the temple and throws everyone out. He is not acting like we would expect a Jewish Messiah to act. He is not here to continue the old traditions of the past. He is here to bring something different.

We started off this morning by asking whether our religion needs fixing. We don't live in first century Jerusalem. We don't go to the temple to worship. We don't have a court of the Gentiles. In fact, we follow the new way that Jesus has introduced. If you consider yourself a Christian, then you believe in the resurrection. That is your center.

But are there ways that we have allowed our faith to look like this religion? How do we demonstrate God to the world? How do we think of ourselves? What is our court

At least in the eyes of the world, we are religious people. And maybe we need to be shaken up. What is going on in our court of the Gentiles? In the places that we come into contact with the world, how are we perceived? How far down the list would the word "life" come to those who don't know us?

What is our faith really about? Is it about Jesus, the light of the world, the pre-existent logos? Or is it about politics? Or ethics? Or believing in the right cause? Or making you feel better about yourself.

Finally, what do we expect from God? A religion allows you to trade worship for what you want out of life. But not Jesus. We worship simply because he is worthy to be worshipped. We're not doing him a favor or making him feel better. We need him. Period.

Do you consider yourself religious? The world does. If you're sitting here on a Sunday morning, you are way in the top percentile of religious people in this area. That's great. We're glad you're here. But what does your religion mean? How is it perceived by others? Is it centered on Christ? And deep down inside, do you think that you're doing God a favor by being here?

Last week I said that Jesus didn't come to bring religion, he came to bring life. This week we've seen that Jesus also didn't come to fix an old religion. He came to offer us something new. To believe and to find life.