

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/15/2024

Why JESUS Cleared the Temple

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, July 16 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray that GOD might increase your passion for whatever is important to you. Ask the HOLY SPIRIT to show you how to carry out your passion and to bless it. Pray that your GOD-given calling becomes fruitful.*

I was thinking this morning about the narrative of JESUS chasing the money changers out of the temple and remembering the number of times I or a colleague has had to address the question of “selling” in the church because of that story. “Can we sell books for the adult class in church?” “Is it okay to raise money for world hunger in church?” “Can a Girl Scout sell cookies in church if her family are members?” The answer to all those and many others like them is, “Yes.” While the desire to follow JESUS as closely as we can is admirable, the problem is that we don’t fully understand the story because we live in a different time and place. So, let me give you a parable (from the Greek *bole*, meaning “to throw,” and *para*, meaning “alongside”) that might help us better grasp the importance of JESUS' actions.

This month, we are collecting pasta for the Interfaith Food Center to help the homeless and those who struggle financially. This is a great way for us to assist people in need. But if this were the Temple in Jerusalem (or a local synagogue), the reason for giving wasn’t to help others. It was so that GOD would better love or favor me. (At least that’s what the people had been taught.) So, if you can bring lots of pasta, GOD will love you greatly. If you can only bring a little, GOD will still love you. Just not as much as those who bring lots of pasta. And if you can’t afford to bring any, well then, you’re just out of luck. As you can see, the message is that GOD loves the rich more than the poor. But that wasn’t what JESUS was teaching about GOD. In fact, just the opposite. GOD loves everyone equally, no matter what your financial (or any other measure of position) situation is. JESUS didn’t like the teaching that the rich were favored.

Second, if you are bringing your three packages of spaghetti to the church, well, there’s a problem. You probably bought your spaghetti at a market that is frequented by lots of people, including some of those people (whoever you choose to think of as “those people”). And we can’t have anything that might have been in contact with “them” in the church. Don’t worry, though, because at the church we have “Christian spaghetti,” or better and more specifically, “Lutheran spaghetti.” (We could get really specific and say, “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America spaghetti,” but let’s just keep it Lutheran for now.) So, you can bring your unclean, unworthy spaghetti and we’ll exchange it for Lutheran spaghetti...at one package of Lutheran spaghetti for three of your unclean spaghetti. After all, in GOD’s eyes, Lutheran spaghetti is so much better than any other kind, right? But you think it’s not fair that you bring three but only get one. Too bad. We’re the church and you don’t have a choice. If you want GOD to love you, you have to do it our way with our spaghetti.

This is what was happening in the Temple when JESUS arrived, only it wasn’t donations to the food bank. It was for offerings to GOD. But you had to buy an animal that had been inspected and certified by the religious leaders as being unblemished and, therefore, okay to sacrifice to GOD. And to buy your animal, you couldn’t use just any old money; you had to use Temple money, which you could get with your money, but at a fraction of what your money was worth. So, the richer you were, the more and/or better animals you could get which meant that GOD would love you more.

That’s why JESUS chased out the moneychangers and the animal sellers. The rules of the Temple were making it harder to worship GOD and were telling a false story about how you earn GOD’s love. You don’t earn GOD’s love; it is already ours, even in our unworthiness as a gift from GOD. And JESUS made sure we would know this by going to the cross and dying for our sins so that we don’t have to worry about how much or what

we give. In Matthew 9:13, JESUS told the Pharisees (the religious lawyers who were telling people what offerings were proper and acceptable, and who was loved by GOD and who wasn't), "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" JESUS was saying that it doesn't matter what kind of spaghetti you bring or how much. What matters is what is in your heart when you bring it. Are you doing it so that others will see what you're doing and praise you? Are you doing it to try to control GOD and earn some favor or blessings? Or are you doing it because of what GOD has already done for you and you want to bless others as you have been blessed, because that is true mercy and that is what GOD desires.

In CHRIST's love,
Pastor Jeffrey