### “Zeal for Your House” Steve Finlan for The First Church, March 3, 2024

**1 Corinthians 1:19–24**

19It is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

**John 2:14–22**

14In the temple [Jesus] found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. 15Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. 16He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” 17His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” 18The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” 19Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” 20The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” 21But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this.

These are two very different passages. The Paul passage is full of irony, the irony that his message doesn’t fit with what either Jews or Greeks want to hear. Unless they believe, people cannot comprehend his message about “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24).

The gospel passage contains a mysterious message, but I wouldn’t call it ironic. It’s just that his remark about raising up the temple is not a reference to the literal temple, but to his body. Even his apostles might not have understood him at first, but they understood after his Resurrection.

The other three gospels have Jesus performing this action, the so-called Cleansing of the Temple, on his last trip to Jerusalem, perhaps less than a week before his arrest. That makes much more sense than having it be set here near the beginning of his ministry, which would mean that the act had no consequences. In the other three gospels, the act helped to lead to his arrest, which makes sense.

It was a brazen and aggressive act, arising out of Jesus’ strong indignation. There seems to be more than one thing that he is angry about. He is definitely angry about the exploitation of the poor. Doves are mentioned twice in John’s account, and doves were mostly sold to poor people, who couldn’t afford cattle or sheep. So when he cries “stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” (2:16), the implication is that they are making money off the poor. People were constantly made to feel that they needed to pay for sacrificial animals, and the temple administration was always right there, ready to make a sale.

I think there was another motivation for Jesus’ anger. The hierarchic system not only favored priests over laity, men over women, and rich over poor, but also Jews over Gentiles, although we only see that element in Mark’s version of the story. In Mark, what he said while stopping the temple commerce was “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (11:17). Mark retained something that the other evangelists lost: Jesus was quoting the line from Isaiah 56 that says it is to be a house of prayer *for all nations*. So it is not just the rich oppressing the poor that outraged Jesus, but also the Jews excluding the Gentiles. Jesus stood up for the lowly, the outcast, the foreigner.

We see from his remarks in the preceding chapters of Mark what he was emphasizing. He gives a lesson that concludes: “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mark 10:31). And then, when James and John ask for high positions in his coming kingdom, he asks if they are willing to share his fate, and ends with “whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (10:44). Then comes the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and then his visit to the temple, where he becomes angry and overturns the tables of the moneychangers (11:8, 15).

He was going out of his way to uplift the humble and downcast, and to criticize the hierarchies of the time. He insisted that many of those who were first *now* would become last, in the end. People should not seek status, but should try to serve others. He wanted the temple to be a place that embodied these prophetic values, and that was open to Gentiles. It is arrogance that he was attacking.

He was upset with the religious setup of his time, which betrayed the most important prophetic principles.

Religious people can be arrogant, can consider themselves holier than others, can look down on foreigners or exploit poor people. This should not be so in any religion that uses Jesus’ name. But it is a natural tendency in humans. Sometimes a little knowledge is dangerous. So also, sometimes a little spirituality is dangerous. One can get full of oneself, thinking oneself holy or anointed. Sometimes the cruelest people are those who think they are doing good, who think they have the right to discipline others, to say “it’s for your own good,” when abusing someone, or to say “I’m teaching them a lesson” when simply practicing cruelty.

Let us be conscious of our own tendencies toward self-righteousness, the tendency to think that others need to “learn a lesson,” while we ourselves have supposedly learned all the lessons. It’s easy to become arrogant—*I know*. All it takes is a little knowledge or a little spirituality.

Let us not close our hearts to those of other cultures, or take advantage of the poor, or look down our noses at those who seem less holy than we seem to ourselves.

Jesus had zeal for his Father’s house, because he had zeal for the spiritual principles it was supposed to represent. Let us remember to make ourselves like servants, that we may become true leaders. Let us remember that many who are last will become first. Let us value the things of the Spirit, the tenderness and empathy and beauty that we see, the way Jesus honored the widow who threw in her last two coins, the way he honored the diminutive tax collector who was eager to hear a word of truth, the way he honored a paralyzed man who was so desperate to hear the truth that he had his friends lower him through a roof.

The story of Washington Gladden concerns a young farmer who grew up to become a leading theologian. He grew up on a farm in upstate New York. In that part of the country there were many revivals and many preachers, but he found no satisfaction till he encountered one preacher who persuaded him to trust the heavenly Father’s love and to see God as a friend. He decided to become a minister, went to Williams College, and wrote what became Williams College’s alma mater. He became minister at State Street Congregational Church in Brooklyn, later moving to a church upstate, then to North Adams, Massachusetts, later to Springfield, and finally to Columbus, Ohio. He openly supported the right of workers to unionize. He did not favor socialism, but rather a responsible application of “Christian law” to issues. He never earned a theological degree, but did receive 35 honorary doctorates. He opposed segregation and wrote a famous sermon against lynching (Wikipedia page). He was a well-known author and theologian, and lived to be 82. Regarding the Lord’s Supper, he wrote, “A communion is a fellowship. The deepest purpose of the sacrament is not only to help us to think about him, and to be grateful to him, but also to bring us into vital, spiritual fellowship with him, so that we shall have his mind in us, and be partakers of his nature; so that his life shall be reproduced in our lives, and we shall in some measure learn to see the world with his eyes, and to feel as he felt, and to act as he acted” (*How Much Is Left of the Old Doctrines?* 277–78). Let us think on this imperative as we share communion today—to feel as he felt, and to act as he acted.

Jesus saw the values of humble but honest people, and he honored them. Let us not look down on the poor, nor shut anyone out of our temple. Rather let us find ways to honor and uplift those who are apparently weak, who are apparently last, by seeing their values.