

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O God.”

These words of the Psalmist are often what my preaching colleagues use to open their sermons. I prefer to call upon Jesus in my own opening, of course, but there is a beautiful humility in these words, a recognition that God is ultimately the one who casts judgment, the one to whom we belong, the one whose considerations we must appreciate the most.

The Psalm also goes on to remind us that the law of the Lord is perfect - it's a reminder of the life to be found in following God's calling and commandments for our life, including the very first commandment, to love God with all our heart and mind and strength, above all other gods. “You shall have no other god except me.”

I wonder what could happen if we used these words of the psalm more concretely in our lives, as a way to guide ourselves into a life in closer unison with this first commandment. What if we really made sure that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts were pleasing and acceptable to God?

What if we truly did love God above all other things?

It can be really hard to keep this focus on God above all things, to love with all our heart and mind and strength. Often our priorities are on false gods - the things we serve more than the God who created and loves us. This reference to false gods isn't an explicit other named deity, but the things that in our day to day lives and in our innermost person are served more than God. The false god of a perfect body, a perfect home or being the perfect parent or grandparent or spouse, the false god of perfectionism, the false god of appearance over substance, the false god of overachieving, the false god of profit over people.

And here's the thing, we are all tempted by these false gods in many ways - it's super hard not to, especially in our modern culture and all its options and staged beauty and constant decision fatigue.

So often when we hear this Gospel story of Jesus turning over the tables and tossing out the coin collections and speaking fiercely to the people in the temple, we are led to think that these money changers and salespeople are corrupt and sinful, and how dare they sell things at the temple in Jerusalem?

But don't we all mess up sometimes? Don't we all think about ease and profit and just go with the flow without looking at the bigger implications sometimes?

Our view of this situation changes significantly if we give these people in the temple a little more empathy, and see ourselves in them too. It's true that they are only human and that humans are not perfect, we are all bound to mess up sometimes. But this lens of empathy gets at a deeper truth of what Jesus is doing in upsetting the whole setup of the market in the temple.

What Jesus actually says, after very physically making his point known by turning over the tables and pouring out the containers of money, is "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!". And what he calls the people to do is get the marketplace out of the place where people go to experience God, out of the place where indeed God dwells. In this case, the temple of Jerusalem.

The temple was a holy place of worship, a significant place with rich history and symbolism where people went to encounter God. The temple here in Jesus' time was the second temple, because the first temple of the Israelites in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians about 600 years prior to the time Jesus was alive. And as they mentioned in the story, it took a very long time to construct another temple - this one under construction for forty-six years! So this temple in this story is a place not only of worship and encountering God, but also a historically rich and hopeful place that symbolized the Hebrew people being able to rebuild after trauma and war, death and exile.

Eventually, in the Roman Empire's pursuit to kill and disband Christian communities after Jesus' death, they destroyed the second temple. This

second destruction happened about 40 years after Jesus' death, and before the gospel of John is believed to have been written.

So the temple was one of the few places where the people of Jerusalem could tangibly encounter God, to be in a holy place where they knew God would dwell. The Romans would not have been so adamant about its destruction if the temple wasn't a significant place for Christians to practice their faith and encounter God. When this story of the temple is told in the other three Gospels (not John), it is usually toward the end of Jesus' ministry, during his time in Jerusalem around the events of Holy Week (indeed John mentions Passover at the beginning of this story), right around when the governmental leaders of the time are trying to figure out ways to have Jesus killed. The fact that this story is told at the beginning of John's Gospel tells us that this moment of upheaving the marketplace in the temple is central to the rest of the ministry Jesus would provide. It gives us a landing point, a reference for what was to come in Jesus' ministry and indeed who He was too. The first miracle Jesus performs is the wine at the wedding in Cana, and the first teaching moment, the first sign Jesus gives to the people is about the purpose of the temple.

We don't often get such a clear explanation of Jesus' signs and intentions like we do in this story of the temple. Jesus never actually destroys the temple, but truly he was speaking about the temple of His body. The narration of this story is in hindsight, by the disciples who were still around after Jesus' death and resurrection. And these words of hindsight, these clear and guiding words connecting Jesus' body as the temple, tell us that Jesus is the place where God dwells too. Jesus upends the physical temple to put the focus on His physical body, his humanness, His belovedness, as the place where God truly dwells. And we, in our own bodies and spirits, as the body of Christ, are also the place where God dwells. And we are worth the love and respect and care and true focus on God that these dwelling places encourage.

So in what ways do we need to be upended for the sake of the places where God dwells? Where do we need this energy of the disruptive Jesus

to help us focus on God? What false gods do we need to denounce in order to live truly for the One who is God above all others?

What we can know for certain, in the midst of these holy disruptions and denouncing of false gods, is that the God who created us and the world around us, is deeply rooted in love. Indeed this first commandment is about loving God, and Jesus' call for us in the greatest commandments are rooted in love of God and neighbor. Whatever is truly loving, in the deep and challenging and life-saving and powerful ways, is holy and pleasing to God. Words of our mouths that lift people up, that meet people where they are in both sorrow and joy, words that advocate for the poor and oppressed, the downtrodden and lonely, the lowly that need to be lifted high and the mighty cast down from their thrones, these are words that are pleasing to God. And actions of love, for ourselves, for the healing of others, for the created world and for every time and place, are pleasing to God as well.

So let's truly embody our identity as places where God dwells. Let's see that love God has for each of His own children in every person, and in ourselves too. Let us cast away the false gods that try to separate us from the God who loves and creates us in God's image, and lean into the commandment to have no other God but the God of love. Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to the God who loves and gives us new life each and every day. Thanks be to God, Amen.