

March 4, 2018  
*John 2:13-22*  
The Profit Motive  
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The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making 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. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After 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 words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.*

What a difference a decade makes ....

Back in the 2000's, business author Jim Collins wrote a best seller entitled, *Good to Great*, as a sequel to his other groundbreaking work, *Built to Last*. Both books were aimed at profiling companies that had "made the leap" to greatness and were "built to last" well into the future. And what were some of the companies that he cited as examples? Circuit City, Fannie Mae, Blockbuster Video and Borders Books to name just a few.

At the time, these companies were firing on all cylinders, and there seemed to be no limit to how far they'd go.

Turns out, however, that by 2015, these high-profile companies had made a bigger leap - all the way off a cliff. As you know, Circuit City, Blockbuster and Borders have all closed and Fannie Mae had to be bailed out by the government in 2008.

As a result, a contrite Jim Collins finally wrote a follow-up to *Good to Great*, aptly titled *How the Mighty Fall*. Looking back at his research and trying to make sense of what had taken place, Collins proposed five attitudes that mark the decline of a company that once had been so great as to have been deemed an American institution. And what are they?

**First is Hubris born from success.** A successful company begins to believe its own press and becomes enamored with itself. The company becomes dogmatic about its products and practices and fails to question their relevance when conditions change.

**Second, the company begins to overreach.** Forgetting the core values that made it great in the first place, it makes leaps into places outside its original purview and excellence is sacrificed for expediency.

**Third, the company's leadership falls into abject denial of the risks and perils ahead.**

Leaders begin to deny that anything is wrong, and refuse to hear bad news, putting a positive spin on everything. They blame external factors instead of taking responsibility for decline.

**Fourth, leader's begin grasping for salvation.** The company begins to look for quick fixes to its problems, and begins grasping at straws to stop the decline. Common "saviors" for a company in this position are: the hiring of a charismatic leader, restructuring, focusing on a revolutionary new product, or other reactive behaviors and strategies.

**And finally they Capitulate to irrelevance or death.** In this stage, the company's spirit and financial strength have eroded to the point of despair. Leaders give up hope and the company slides into insignificance and eventual death.

These are the factors that eventually put once thriving companies out of business.

If you haven't figured it out by now I chose Collin's commentary on the decline of great companies because I believe he could just as easily have been describing the plight of the temple in Jesus' day *or* the state of the mainline church today.

- Hubris
- Overreaching
- Hunkering down and becoming insular by refusing to pay attention to losses and their causes
- Grasping for salvation in the quick fix rather than deep reflection on cultural changes affecting growth
- Capitulation to decline due to an end to hope and refusal to find a renewable source of hope.

Like a no-nonsense consultant, Jesus comes to the temple to provide a wake-up call, and O how the mighty are about to fall.

This story of Jesus running the money-changers out of the temple is common to all four gospels. That would seem to indicate that it is a key event in the life of Jesus as well as the psyche of the early church. And since the temple was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, Jesus' words and actions had thus, not only been prophetic, but were a stark reminder that any institution that claims to be of God is doomed to failure if it refuses to pay attention to God's own core purpose and values. And what's going on in the shadows of the temple altar has little to do with God at all.

I recall with you now the history of the temple as it follows the same arc as today's behemoth corporate failures. The Temple began when Solomon built it at God's behest, marking the permanent dwelling place of God among his chosen people. Solomon's temple was designed to remind people of the Garden of Eden – the place where God and humans once dwelt face to face; and there the priests offered sacrifices to God for the forgiveness of sin. The temple was thus thought of as the center point of all creation. It represented the best of the covenant enterprise between God and God's people.

Of course, the people of God started to believe in their own brand of hubris, shunning their God and reaching out toward other divine markets in the form of idol worship. Their overreaching and failure to recognize the warning signs of apostasy led to major fractures in their corporate life, and eventually gave them overconfidence in their own hype. It was actually thought that no matter what they did, God would never allow Israel to fall, or the temple to be destroyed – which was exactly what happened in 587 BC, with the leadership of Israel being exiled at the hands of foreign invaders.

When they *were* allowed to return in 515 BC, they rebuilt the temple, but it was never what it once was. Even when Herod the Great undertook the project of restoring and expanding the temple mount just before the time of the birth of Jesus, it was really more of a vanity project than a real religious undertaking.

By the time Jesus walked up to the temple on the day he drove the moneychangers out, it was clear that it was a shell of its former glory and mission. Instead of being a holy place – its core identity and function – it had become a shopping mall, a bank, a government building and revolutionary symbol. It had long ceased to be what it had originally been built for: a container of the sacred – the coming together of God and humanity.

What was it that caused Jesus to get so angry that he drove people out with a whip? It could only be one thing: injustice.

The sacrificial system in the temple had evolved, over the centuries, into an efficient machine for fleecing rich and poor alike, earning a great deal of money for the insiders who ran it. If you went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, your goal was offering a sacrifice, according to the law of Moses. You could bring your own sacrificial animal, but many who had journeyed from afar found it easier to purchase a beast locally, at a steep markup.

The law said you had to present a perfect animal, without mark or blemish. Unless you purchased a pre-approved animal within the temple precincts, you had to bring your offering before an inspector, who would tell you whether or not it met the grade. The inspectors were in cahoots with the animal-sellers, who greased their palms with silver. So rarely did the inspectors approve a sacrificial animal brought in from the outside.

And there was something else. If you had journeyed from one of the lands of the Jewish diaspora – Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, or Rome – the coins in your purse would have been imperial coins, engraved with the Emperor's likeness. Such graven images violated the Second Commandment, and so were forbidden within the temple precincts. In order to buy yourself a sacrificial animal, you had to first exchange your Roman money for image-free Judean coins. The money changers, who had a monopoly, charged exorbitant commissions; but the poor pilgrims had no recourse. So the temple merchants got them coming and going.

The reason Jesus raged through the temple therefore had nothing to do with the proximity of money to a place of worship, as some modern commentators have assumed. His anger was sparked by injustice: the fact that the temple - THE symbol of God's gracious presence - had been transformed into a corrupt machine for cheating pilgrims out of their life savings.

So Jesus walked right in and drove out the sellers, which effectively shut down the temple's sacrificial function for a brief time. Jesus was thus performing an enacted parable, foretelling in his actions the *great* going-out-of-business day to come. The temple would be destroyed, but a new one would be raised up: the temple of his own body

- literally in his resurrection and
- theologically in the birth of the church, a new sacred community of saints - a community founded on his life, death, and resurrection. From there on, his disciples, formed together in community around *his* sacrifice, rather than the temple cult, would represent the presence of God. And those people would include not just the Jews but the gentiles as well.

Indeed, Jesus would do what the temple cult could not. He would give himself away instead of pursuing more power, calling his disciples to do the same - lose their lives in order to find them.

He engaged in the risky venture of challenging the prevailing religious worldview and risked death on a cross to see his mission through.

He didn't grasp at another way of salvation, but embodied it in his own person.

And, finally, he didn't capitulate to death, but demonstrated the reality of resurrection.

In short, Jesus showed his disciples that the path from good to great was the path of suffering and self-denial, and not the wide road of the temple that led straight off a cliff. (pause)

This all leads to a whole set of uncomfortable questions:

- Do we measure the church's success in ways that cause us to have hubris or humility?
- Are we so fixated on the comfortable sense of worship and community we have that we fail to question whether we're really doing what Jesus wants?
  
- Are we maintaining the once great institution of the Church at the expense of making real disciples one person at a time?
  
- Should we be more prophetic and less soothing?
  
- Do we blame the secular culture, the economy, the government or any other outside force for our overall decline rather than take responsibility for it?
  
- Do we grasp at easy fixes that cost us little – the right new program, a new good preacher, better coffee – that will turn everything around quickly?
  
- Do we have a spirit of realistic hope or a spirit of defeat or perhaps worse – a penchant for false optimism in the midst of the possible demise of our temple?

How we honestly answer these questions may be warning signs that the church is going out of business unless we change course. The way back is to allow Jesus to come in and clean house. And as the gospels show, that may not be so pretty.

So another question for us to ponder: If Jesus were to come into the larger church as it exists today, what would he want to drive out in order to accomplish his purposes through you?

Or let's bring it down even further. If Jesus were to walk into Trinity in the flesh, whip in hand, what might he want to drive out in order to accomplish his purposes through you and me? What practices or programs or perceptions do we need to discontinue in order to be the incarnate Body of Christ in our community? What would it mean for Jesus to put our church out of business, in effect, in order to start something new?

Maybe you think I am being morbid. Maybe you are right. But if so, the good news is that descriptions of death are not the same with God as they are with us. With God, death is never an end. God has and always will bring life out of the lifeless.

For instance, did you know that the most sacred symbol in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is a tree? - a sprawling, shade-bearing, 80-year-old American elm. Tourists drive from miles around to see her. People pose for pictures beneath her. Arborists carefully protect her. She adorns posters and letterhead. The city treasures the tree, not for her appearance, but her apparent miraculous resurrection.

Because you see, she endured the Oklahoma City bombing.

Timothy McVeigh parked his death-laden truck only yards from her. His malice killed 168 people, wounded 850, destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, and buried the tree in rubble. No one expected it to survive. No one, in fact, gave any thought at all to the dusty, branch-stripped tree.

But then she began to bud. Sprouts pressed through damaged bark; green leaves pushed away gray soot. Life resurrected from an acre of death. People noticed. The tree modeled the new life the victims desired. So they gave the elm a name: the Survivor Tree. Today, it is the most sacred object in all of Oklahoma. Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants: God Still Does the Impossible* (W Publishing Group, 2006), 43-44.

And then there is the incident that occurred a few years back at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. A group of monks from the monastery of the Dalai Lama worked for nearly a month at the creation of a six-foot-wide mandala made of colored sand ground from gemstones. It was to be the centerpiece of an exhibit called "Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet." People from around San Francisco came each day to watch the monks work silently, bending over a low platform as they laid out the intricate patterns that were to symbolize the cosmos.

The day before the mandala was to be completed, a woman jumped across the barriers and destroyed the mandala, shuffling it to smithereens with her feet while shouting something about "Buddhist death squads." A month's work by a whole community of monks was wiped out in a moment of insanity.

The reaction of the monks? "We don't feel any anger," said one. "We don't know how to judge her motivations. We are praying for her, for love and compassion."

As Gregg Levoy, who tells this story in *The Sun*, put it: "The real teaching of the sacred symbol of holiness, the mandala, has turned out to be not in its construction, but in its demise, and in its creators' faithful loving response to its destruction." - *Utne Reader*, January/February 1993, 135-36.

What if the same is true of the institutional church?

Let us pray.

Gracious God, help us to put our trust in you rather than in the institutions and symbols we so readily substitute for you - that we may have life and be bringers of life to others. And now bless these gifts that they may help us live our calling to make disciples one at a time.

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