

Several months ago, I flew down to Texas to give a talk. I ate supper on the airplane—a half ounce of pretzels and a cup of water—but was still hungry so ate a few peanuts I'd found in the seat cushions. **It was late by the time I got to the hotel and the restaurant was closed.** I didn't have a car, so I couldn't drive anywhere. My hotel room had a minibar in it. **I looked in there for something to eat, but it was crazy expensive—six dollars for a package of cheese and crackers.** Five dollar candy bars. It was outrageous. They had a lemon scented moist towelette in there for fifty cents. I thought of buying that and sucking the lemon out.

I ended up not buying anything. **I was on an expense account, but I've been a Quaker too long to start throwing money around, so I stayed hungry.** But I was mad, the kind of mad you get when you know you're being ripped off and there's nothing you can do about it. **The hotel offered a complimentary breakfast the next morning and I ate all the Fruit Loops in the plastic bin and drank four pints of milk.**

Don't you hate seeing people taken advantage of, people who are in a situation where they desperately need what someone else has, and they end up being exploited and treated unfairly?

Jesus has entered Jerusalem. It is the final week of his life. He was warmly received, but over the horizon you can just make out the cross. **So there is a bit of a shadow across the sun, a hint of darkness.** He goes to the Temple. He had been there many times before. He entered the Court of the Gentiles—the one room in the Temple reserved for non-Jews. **But the room is packed with hotel owners, selling cheese and crackers for six dollars.** Actually, they're selling sacrificial animals at exorbitant prices and exchanging currencies at high rates.

Though Jesus had no doubt been aware of this practice for a long time, he chose the week of his death to make a statement.

He was offended, I suppose, on two levels.

Offended first because the presence of moneychangers and animal sellers in the Court of the Gentiles left no room for the Gentiles. Israel was supposed to be a light unto the nations and here they were, squeezing the nations out of the one room in the Temple in which they were permitted.

And offended because people were being take advantage of, people who were required by religious law to make a sacrifice, but had to pay dearly to do it and were being exploited.

So Jesus decided to make a little editorial statement and a little room for the Gentiles at the same time. He clears the room.

It's a funny thing about religious buildings. **They are both a necessity and a danger.*** They are always erected with such high and noble purposes, intended to help us draw closer to God, intended to help us love more deeply and widely, and live more happily. **We need those spaces in our lives, and any society which doesn't have them is poorer for it.**

But these sacred spaces are also a danger, because after awhile we shrink God down to fit just in that space and nowhere else. **When King Solomon built the Temple and prayed at the dedication, he almost apologized to God.** "Heaven and earth cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built." (1Kings 8:27)

With these buildings comes ministers and priests. Sometimes we are given more power than we have the character to handle. So people who were meant to be servants become rulers. **After awhile the building becomes more important than the God it was built to honor.** The building becomes everything. The building becomes the church, becomes our God. **What was intended to a beautiful, life-giving space becomes a trap and those who sit in it lose their way.** Something that began as a necessity, has become a danger.

* I am indebted to Fred Craddock, author of *The Interpretation Commentary on Luke* for this insight.

But then sometimes someone will come along who loves both God and the space, who knows the importance of the space, but also hasn't forgotten the sovereignty of God, and he or she will purify the space and reclaim it for its intended purpose. **That's what this morning's gospel story is all about, about clearing the clutter from a place whose purpose was to offer beauty and uplift the soul.**

I was driving down Interstate 75 last year through Tennessee and it just broke my heart. **You'd pop up over a mountain and there'd be this gorgeous view and right smack in the middle of it, some corporation had hacked down the trees to put up a God-awful sign telling me I could buy a half gallon of Coke for ninety-nine cents.** I always want to cut those billboards down. They take a God-created loveliness and throw down a piece of trash right in the middle of it.

Likewise, God gave Israel the Temple and told them to enjoy it, to have their hearts lifted by it, with only one qualification. "This Court of the Gentiles will be for everyone to enjoy. No matter their nationality. They can come here and be surrounded by this beauty and I will fill their hearts with love and their minds with high and noble thoughts." **But then they went and stuck a billboard right in the middle of the room.** And it was so huge there was no room for anyone or anything else. They killed people's view of God.

So Jesus did some careful cutting and restored the view.

You know, the worse thing we can do to somebody is block their view of God, kill their capacity to see beauty, kill their capacity to hope and dream.

Worse thing we can do. Happens in churches all the time. Someone will come along, hurting, aching, lonely, wanting desperately to have something beautiful and lovely in their life, so they'll come to church, and they'll be assaulted with rules, made to feel they don't belong, made to feel they're not wanted. They're snapped at, beat up, put down. **All they wanted was to see God and they got poked them in the eyes.** Happens all the time in churches.

Isn't it interesting that the two times in the Bible when Jesus got the most angry was when somebody cut off someone else's view of God. **That's when Jesus was the most upset.** When someone wanted to draw near to God, and someone else pushed them back and said, "There's no room for you here." It happened two times. The first time was when the disciples didn't permit the children to come near Jesus, and Jesus stopped in the middle of his sermon and said, "You give them a front row seat, and don't ever block their way again." (Mark 10:13-16) And the second time was in the Temple, when the Gentiles had been crowded out of the only room in the Temple they were permitted to enter.

We've got to be so careful.

We're building this new meetinghouse, and the biggest reason is because people are coming here wanting to find God, wanting to see and experience something beautiful and hopeful and meaningful, wanting to get a little perspective, but there isn't room enough for them.

Now we can do one of two things: **We can say, "There's no room for you here."** And a lot of churches say that, in one way or another. They either don't physically make room, or they make entrance into that church so difficult, so burdensome, that after awhile people drift away discouraged. **Or we can make room.** We can remember how it was when we needed beauty and meaning in our lives, how we felt when our souls were impoverished and malnourished, and we can scoot over and make some room and lift them a little higher so they can see over the fence and enjoy the loveliness.

Isn't that why we're here—to help others be healed by the same love that healed us. Of course it is.

Sometimes Israel forgot that. **Sometimes we forget that.** Let today be a day we remember it.