

**Shaking the Foundation: The Church in Motion
(John 2:13-22)**

For twenty-five years I was involved in the design, and construction of large dams all over the world. One of the most important aspects of a dam project is selecting the site. There are dozens of factors that must be considered in the site selection process, but in the end, the foundation on which the dam will be constructed is the determining factor.

The foundation is important for many reasons. One has to do with permeability. If the foundation is not impervious the water in the reservoir will seep under and around the dam and flow on down stream. In the worst case, the water flowing under the dam will erode the foundation and the structure will fail. The failure can be sudden and catastrophic, causing death and destruction in a violent wall of water.

Ideally, a dam is built on a solid rock foundation. When that is not possible, the foundation must be prepared in special ways so that it will support the incredibly large static loads created by the water in the reservoir as well as the weight of the dam itself.

The loads can also be dynamic, generated by landslides in the reservoir and earthquakes. Earthquakes are particularly important in the preparation of the dam foundation. When the foundation shakes, the soil vibrates and behaves like a liquid and the foundation fails.

When the foundation is properly prepared and constructed it is able to withstand the shaking tremors of an earthquake and the dam remains strong,

-serving its intended purpose, under the most difficult circumstances. But sometimes foundations deteriorate over time and cannot withstand the shaking. So it is with other things needing a firm foundation – like the Temple in Jerusalem two thousand years ago or even the church today. Please pray with me.

Creator God, in the midst of our complacency, in our willingness to continue to do business as usual in Christ's holy church, we sometimes need to have our foundation shaken. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read. Make my words your words and help us to hear your call to be the church in motion, to be transformed before we need to be reformed. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

In the gospel lesson this morning, Jesus storms the temple. There he finds people selling cattle, sheep, and doves. Money changers are seated at tables. He fashions a whip of cords and drives them all out of the temple.

Then he dumps out the coins of the money changers and turns their tables upside down. After that he confronts the ones selling the doves and orders them to take "these things out of here! Stop making God's house a marketplace!"

Like a dam, the temple was built on a foundation. Unlike the dam, however, the temple was also founded

on the tenets of Mosaic Law handed down by God and administered by the Levite priests. The temple was founded on a time-honored religion that incorporated God's covenant: "I will be your God and you will be my people."

What Jesus saw as he entered the temple was the cumulative affect of years of complacency – business as usual. The sacred sacrificial rites once ordained by God had been reduced to a matter of commerce – reduced to buying and selling and profiteering. The sacrifices were no longer intimate and deeply personal as God intended. The selling of sacrifices and the paying of the temple tax had become business in the marketplace – business as usual. Jesus must have wondered where God's grace was in this buying and selling.

The temple was no longer the place where God dwelled. It had become a trading place – like a futures market where God's grace was reduced to a commodity. "How much are you able to pay – the price of a cow or will it be a sheep. Perhaps two doves if you can't afford a real sacrifice. The law does allow it. We'll sell you whatever you can afford – for a slight profit, of course."

Jesus saw that religion had become "business as usual." He knew that the temple sacrifices were hollow and no longer important to God. A new era was on the horizon. In the incarnation, God in Jesus was not abandoning the law but was transforming it – by writing it on the hearts of God's people.

Jesus shook the foundation of the temple – the religious foundation of the Hebrew faith tradition. He saw that the religion had been reduced to simple commerce or "business as usual." And

what he saw was offensive to him – offensive to God. And he was he angry.

What would Jesus find if he entered our church this morning? Would he perceive our practice of faith, our worship, to be "business as usual" and our offerings an attempt to buy God's grace? When Jesus saw the people engaged in business as usual he turned society upside down. He turned the foundation of the temple upside down. He saw the need for change.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Jesus took on the role of reformer when he turned the temple upside down. Would he do the same here this morning? When the kingdom comes into conflict with our own "business as usual" are we offended? Are we resisting the change that is needed to bring the kingdom into this world?

The synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – place this disturbing scene in the temple at the *end* of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' actions in the synoptic gospels give the authorities the reason they need to have him put to death. The author of the Gospel of John, on the other hand, places Jesus' actions in the temple at the beginning of his ministry.

In the Gospel of John, the radical actions of Jesus in the temple actually set the tone for his coming ministry rather than his crucifixion. He begins with the temple and quickly moves to turn the realm upside down – shaking its very foundation. From this point on everything Jesus does is aimed at teaching the people that they cannot continue to do business as usual. God's kingdom is coming and they need to prepare. Jesus shook the foundation of the temple and the very foundation of Jewish culture.

The people asked Jesus to explain his actions. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" He answered, "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?"

Jesus was not talking about bricks and mortar. He was talking about his body and the resurrection which was to come. But Jesus makes it clear that the Jews cannot continue to do business as usual. From this point forward in his ministry everything the Jews hold as sacred is threatened by destruction. All tradition is called into question. Tradition was in need of reform!

What about today? Christianity is no longer the fastest growing religion in the world – or even in the United States! The truth is Christianity is not even growing in the United States! In 2002 there were 92 United Methodist churches in our Northern Illinois Conference – one quarter of our churches – that didn't receive a single new member – by confirmation, profession of faith or otherwise.

We are living in radically different times. Today, it's society that is shaking our foundation – the foundation of the traditional church. In the 21st century more and more people will no longer see the Church in its traditional role of the past. In the 21st century more people look for experiential religion. They seek to experience God in new ways – using their senses in different ways.

Jesus' actions in the temple serve as a warning to us today, here in the 21st century. We cannot continue to be the church by doing "business as usual." We have to be the church in

motion, moving with people into a new era of understanding.

We need to look for new ways to share our experiences of Jesus Christ with those who do not know him. We can no longer expect others to evangelize on our behalf. We have all become evangelists by default – each and every one of us is an evangelist! I know some people don't like that word – *evangelist* – but that's what reaching out to the world is.

We have an opportunity right now to discover new ways to be the church. We have an opportunity right now to discover new and exciting ways to go beyond doing "business as usual."

We need to realize that we *can* do things differently even if "we've never done it that way before." This is not so easy to do. Like the buyers and sellers in the temple, we are comfortable with familiar ways of our past. And we are nervous about being shaken out of our comfort zone and into the future where we have never gone before. As followers of Christ we, like the early disciples, are called to move beyond our comfort zone. Life on the faith journey is not always comfortable. After all, God promises us eternal life, not necessarily easy life.

We need to be the church in motion by leading the way into the new millennium. We need to lead rather than follow. The way we lead is by *being* the church to those who don't know us. Being the church in the 21st century means being willing to adapt to the needs of those who don't know us. And it means being willing to model our faith and spirituality so that others will want to follow Christ and grow with us.

To be the church in motion we need to understand – to truly believe – that we have something other people

genuinely need. Let me say that again. We need to truly believe that we have something other people really need. The problem is those people don't know what it is we have. So we have to take what we have to those people. The people we need to reach are not just going to walk through our doors.

We need to meet people beyond the church on their terms – on their turf – where they work, eat, play, and live. This is why each and every one of us has to be an evangelist. Each of us must be willing to go to the people and share our experiences of God with them.

I know most of you pretty well and I *know* that God is working in your lives. If you truly believe that God is not at work in your life then come see me. We will work together to help you see just where God is in your life.

The foundation is shaking. Can you feel the earth moving beneath your feet? God is calling us to be the church in motion – not the church at rest. God is calling us to boldly go witness to the world for Christ. Jesus is calling each of us to let others know what we have and to share with them why they need it. The foundation is shaking. How will you respond?