They stood gazing in wonder at the beauty of St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. One of them, Jim Colley, an artist who painted the large canvases in our James Gallery, was taken with the aesthetics all around. Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, for instance. The other, Ann Hutchison, a celebrated NASA scientist, was agog at the engineering and architecture, chiefly Michelangelo’s dome. Looking down in the nave, they noted the markings on the floor that indicated the smaller size of other grand cathedrals in Europe. At one point, almost overcome in the moment, Jim whispered to Ann, “Wonder what this cost the Catholic Church?” Quick as a flash she replied, “Only the Protestant Reformation.”

We all have a tendency to associate our churches with our buildings. Many have wrestled afresh with that this past year as we have been shut out of our facilities due to the pandemic and have had to relearn that the church is the people of God not the building of the people of God. But it’s easy to see how attached we become to our buildings. We can’t wait to get back here. It’s not St. Peter’s, but we have worked hard to make more beautiful what started out as a largely functional space. We’re protective of these spaces and feel a sense of God’s presence when we are here. We’ve had some of our most precious spiritual experiences in this very room. Places matter to us.

So, imagine this moment when Jesus turns over the tables of the moneychangers and talks about the temple being destroyed and then raised in three days. It’s a side of Jesus we rarely see. It was especially jarring to those whose whole life revolved around the religious and economic apparatuses of the temple.

The temple in Jerusalem was a glorious thing. This was the second temple built there. The first dated to King Solomon in the tenth century BCE. It was destroyed by the Babylonians four centuries later. This one was known as Herod’s Temple. Herod the Great started reconstruction on it about 19 BCE and it wouldn’t be finished
until 62 CE. This magnificent building on top of Jerusalem seemed to touch heaven. It was central to Jewish worship during the lifetime of Jesus, only to be destroyed about forty years after his death. It vastly outshined Solomon’s temple and was the glory of Israel, even if it was financed by the dubious half-Jewish ruler, Herod. It would have been unimaginably painful, even to the point of blasphemous in the moment, to speak of its destruction.

But who is Jesus and why was he so provocative in this literal and symbolic act of disruption? We can pick up the point by following the story closely.

It was Passover and Jerusalem was hopping. People crowded into the streets and tried to gain access to the temple to make their sacrifices. The traditional offering of cattle, sheep or doves—depending upon what one could afford—often required that pilgrims purchase the animal there at the temple, because they couldn’t bring one along the journey. The money they brought also had to be converted to Tyrian currency, in order not to pay the temple tax that couldn’t be paid in Roman coinage. But it wasn’t just that business was being conducted in the temple; it was that the poor were being exploited by the merchants who would charge for their services in a place where Jesus believed everybody should have had equal access to God.

The temple precincts were even constructed in a way to make distinctions. The temple proper included the vestibule to the sanctuary where only the priests could enter; then the sanctuary proper, and finally the inner chamber called the Holy of Holies, where only the chief priest could enter once a year on the Day of Atonement. Outside the sanctuary was the area where the slaughter of animals by the priests took place, then on the extended temple mount was the courtyard of the Israelites, where only men could enter, then the Court of Women, and finally the Court of the Gentiles. It was an elaborate hierarchy of values based on purity culture.

What started out as an earnest system of holiness had become an unholy mess. Religion was becoming transactional rather than relational. It was about to cost a reformation.

Now, just a quick reminder: what’s happening here is not
justification for the rightness of Christianity against the wrongness of Judaism. Jesus was a Jew and never a Christian. He was calling on his own people to go to the heart of true religion; he was not rejecting it wholesale in favor of a new revelation that produced our Christian version and consigned Judaism to the dustbin of history. Christianity today is every bit as subject to the same critique Jesus was making in the temple that day. And frankly, most forms of Judaism today are more committed to radical equality than are many expressions of Christianity. Go figure.

Anyway, back to the story ... Jesus fashioned a whip of cords. Now, we should note that this wasn’t a flash of emotion. It would have taken time for him to do this tedious work. In other words, he had time for his anger to abate, but he made a deliberate plan to protest in this prophetic way.

This is a point we should keep in mind in our advocacy work. We sometimes react quickly in defense of vulnerable people in crisis. We did this with our beloved Louise Troh when she lost her fiancé, Eric Duncan, to Ebola six years ago. We sometimes rush out to join protests, as some of us did in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s murder, the killing of Botham Jean and George Floyd, to name just a few of too many. But we also do so deliberately in seeking to lobby for public school funding, equal rights of LGBTQ friends, freedom to vote legislation, among other things.

This was Passover when Jesus flipped the tables. Passover commemorates God’s deliverance of the children of Israel from economic slavery to Pharoah. They were exploited workers. And here Jesus sees the temple reverting to just such activity. When he says they should not make his Father’s house a marketplace, the word in the Greek for house is oikos, and the word for economy is oikonomos. Jesus was messing with business, because business was messing with people.

This should inform our Christian activism. Business isn’t off limits to faith-motivated advocates. There’s a place for disrupting systems of economic oppression, like predatory payday and auto title lenders who legally exploit the poor and should be held accountable for their greed.
This gets to Jesus’ point, I think, about the primacy of persons. *Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days,* he says. He was referring to the locus of God’s presence being in him, the temple of his own body. He is talking about his death and resurrection. And the disciples didn’t fully understand what he was saying until after his resurrection.

Jesus shifted the focus of true religion from ritual observance and spatial location to the human person. The way we remember today what he said that day, is to keep our focus there. Our buildings must not become places to manage people’s relationship to God. They must be tools of mission, places of compassion, doors *open to all and closed to none,* don’t you know?!

During the snowstorms a few weeks ago, the emergency shelter of The Family Place was destroyed. Pipes burst and 50 women and 73 children who had fled domestic violence were without anywhere safe or warm to go. The CEO, Paige Flink, was desperate and put out a distress call. I was able to connect with her quickly and offered our church building to put them up. We aren’t set up for such a thing, but that didn’t matter. These women and children mattered. People matter more than places.

From the city emergency staff that arranged Dallas school buses, to the Salvation Army that provided cots, to Heather Mustain and Leigh Curl and Dale Pride and David Nabors and our custodial staff, we made it work. Lay leaders immediately affirmed our decision. I couldn’t be prouder.

I knew then that I was going to preach soon on this passage. It was in my mind. This is how scripture works on us: it helps us remember what Jesus said.

Curiously, it’s the same reason we have NOT been using our building to hold services during the COVID pandemic. You all know that the governor announced this week that come Wednesday, all restrictions, including mask mandates, will be lifted in order to get the economy going again. Because of religious liberty concerns, churches have been free all this time to meet if they so chose. Many have worshipped in person during these months, and some have done so responsibly while others have seen staff and
worshippers come down with the virus as a result. It has been our policy to worship virtually during this time. We have sought to protect one another and our neighbors as best we could, despite the fact that in doing so we have run the risk of other kinds of human suffering due to isolation and loneliness. These decisions have been painful and difficult. I will tell you that we have tried not to be arrogant about our decision as if we have perfect wisdom. I know I don’t. But we have done what we’ve done with a view to remembering what he said.

We are the body of Christ, Wilshire. And we remember what he said when we willingly sacrifice ourselves as he did for the sake of those who need liberation and healing, protection and provision. Our Lenten theme is dying to live, and this is one way we have been learning what that means. Amen.