

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A few weeks ago, I read an online article about airports in our nation and how many of them are developing alternate revenue streams: they are striving to produce income from other than their primary business of transporting people and products through the skies above.

I didn't know, prior to this, that the Dallas-Fort Worth and Denver airports have fracking operations on their properties – those two airports are receiving substantial monies from natural gas and oil royalties – and other airports are looking to do the same.

Reading that online article made me wonder about the solar panels at the Indianapolis Airport – are those there for environmental or economic reasons?

Pilgrim member Marv Brethauer is now retired, but he used to be the environment, conservation, and wildlife department manager at the Indianapolis Airport, and the installation of the first of those solar panels came during his tenure.

I called Marv up week before last and asked him if the solar panels were at the airport for environmental or economic reasons, and he said both: they are an alternate source of energy, and they do provide some income for the airport.

The article I read questioned whether or not airports should be diversifying. If airports are involved in other businesses, will that damage their effectiveness in accomplishing their main business? That may be a legitimate question, and the conversation about it is sure to go on for years to come.

This conversation about airports and their businesses can be likened to conversations taking place in churches across the country. What is the church's primary task? What happens if the church goes in too many directions at the same time?

When does the church need to say “no” to some good things (and some not-so-good things) so it can do the most important things with excellence and vision? Jesus encountered similar questions and circumstances 2,000 years ago.

In John's Gospel, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration much earlier than is reported in the other gospels. And, upon arriving at the temple, Jesus finds “people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables” (John 2:14).

These tables were set up to accommodate worshipers from out of town so they could bring the proper sacrifices for Passover. Notice that John did not record Jesus saying, as Matthew, Mark and Luke do, anything about the temple being a “house of prayer,” or about the money changers and vendors making it a “den of robbers.”

This leads some readers to conclude that John was talking about a separate event from the one Matthew, Mark and Luke describe. Others say that both John and the other three writers were describing the same event and that John simply puts it early in his gospel.

Whatever the case, Jesus' actions were swift and definitive. He made a whip of cords and drove all of the sheep and cattle out of the temple. He overturned the moneychangers' tables and poured out their coins. And he told those who were selling doves to take them out of the temple. (John 2:15-16)

Perhaps it is just as surprising that no one tried to stop Jesus from doing all of this. No one stood up to him or even asked him to stop. Jesus' passionate actions in response to all of this were certainly not the actions of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" about whom so many of us learned in Sunday school.

What Jesus said during this event is very important: "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (John 2:16b). Jesus rightly saw what was going on – that in the guise of being helpful to the out-of-town worshippers, people in the temple had turned its focus from worship to commerce.

Instead of being the place where one's devotion and worship of God were foremost, the emphasis had been switched to the externals of buying the proper sacrificial animal.

John does not record Jesus saying anything about the high exchange rates people were being charged, even though this was certainly happening. Rather, Jesus quickly and decisively got to the heart of the issue: his Father was not being worshiped, and other things had gotten in the way.

His disciples later remembered the verse from Psalm 69 where it is written, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (Psalm 69:9; John 2:17).

The Jewish leaders finally said to Jesus, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" (John 2:18) One of the tried and true methods of deflecting blame away from oneself is to go on the attack. It's almost as if these religious leaders said to him, "Hey! Who made you boss? Who put you in charge?"

They really didn't know what they were asking. John's whole gospel was written to show the signs Jesus did "so that [people would] come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [they would] have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Jesus' response to the Jewish leaders was as surprising as anything he had done or said that day. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). That short reply addresses many different things. Certainly, it had reference to the coming destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. But perhaps it also referred to what they were already doing.

By making his Father's house a marketplace, they were destroying the temple right then by their actions and attitudes. Of course, Jesus' main point in this statement was a reference to his death and resurrection.

Three years later, "his disciples remembered he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (John 2:22).

One further thought about Jesus' response about the temple: Jesus identified himself as the temple. Today, we should likely remind ourselves, "The church building is not the temple of God. Jesus is. When Jesus died for us and rose from the dead, he replaced the temple with himself. Jesus is the universal Immanuel, God with us."

Jesus went to great lengths not only the day he cleansed the temple but also throughout his ministry, to point people to his Father. One of the church's primary tasks is to help us worship God. Another is to help us hear what God might say to us.

Our worship should serve as a channel for God to reach us, ask us to change, and inspire us to see new tasks of service and ministry, and to experience God's rich blessings.

Yes, we who organize and lead worship have an obligation to do all in our power to make way for everybody present to hear and be attune to the Spirit of God.

We all have a responsibility to come ready to listen, to expect God to speak to us in Word and Meal, and also in the hymns and music, the silences, and in the general environment of the service.

My Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary is probably out-of-date, but it says "worship is respect and reverence paid to a divine being."

Notice that the being, God, is divine. The worship should have spiritual dimensions because it's connected to God, but as long as the worshippers have bodies and earthly connections, there will always be an earthly and mundane aspect of our worship.

And there's nothing more earthly and mundane in worship than the announcements! And I know some of you don't like the announcements because you tell me! "Pastor, don't tell us about the people in the prayers; just pray for them."

But then someone who has asked to be in the prayers says, "Pastor, when you pray for me at church, please tell people that I'm having cataract surgery on Tuesday, so I don't have to answer a lot of phone calls and respond to a bunch of e-mails."

"Pastor, the announcements coming after "The Sharing of the Peace" and before the offering are a big distraction. Can't you just do the announcements before we start worship?"

Well, of course, we could – but is that really the way we want to begin our morning with God together? Last July, on a vacation Sunday, Pat and I worshipped with an ELCA congregation in northern Ohio, and the pastor began with the announcements, which admittedly were too long, but even if they had been brief, I wouldn't have liked it.

By the way, I felt pretty good about everything else there: the order of worship in the printed bulletin was clear; the sermon was good; the singing was good; I felt welcome there, though Pat did say she thought the people could have been a little friendlier.

I didn't like the announcements to start: I went there ready to worship – ready to praise and honor God. Having the announcements first seemed to say that instead was the most important thing.

Maybe you don't feel as strongly about the announcements at worship as Jesus did about the money-changers in the temple, but today's Gospel is our reminder that our worship is important.

So let this be a call for those of us who lead worship to do all we can to keep the focus of our worship on Christ, and on God's saving work among us. And let this be a call to all who attend to come to worship saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9). Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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