

Attorney
Knox Presbyterian Church
Preached March 10, 1985
Cleansing of Temple.

Context: Ordination (Installation) of Elders/Deacons

It's tough to be a leader. We live in a society that has become so anti-establishment in the last twenty or thirty years. It used to be that presidents and senators were respected and looked up to. But today, under the scrutiny of the news media, leaders are portrayed to us "warts and all"; every night we hear about another scandal, another indiscretion. Anyone who runs for a public office today knows that his or her life will be unmercifully scrutinized and criticized.

That anti-establishment mentality affects the church. It used to be an honor to hold the office of elder or deacon. President Benjamin Harrison said that he had many honors which he held dear, but none of them could be rated higher than his position as a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church. But today if you are an elder or deacon you're not likely to get much respect. You're liable to take some abuse. You may receive all kinds of criticism. Some people in the congregation will be quick to point out how far short your life falls from the ideal elder, deacon, or pastor. If anything goes wrong in the church you will be, at least, partially blamed. You will find yourself criticized for the stands of the denomination as a whole, even when you don't agree with them.

Today, when people think of you as elders and deacons, they are not so likely to compare you with St. John the elder or Phoebe the deacon. In our anti-institutional times they are more likely to associate you with the leaders in the Temple in Jerusalem against whom Jesus vented his wrath when he cleansed the temple. In the light of all of this, do you still want to go through with your ordination and installation?

Let's take a closer look at these religious leaders to discover why Jesus was so angry with them. I want us to look at these leaders in the best light, not the worst. They were faced with enormous responsibilities

just like you elders and deacons. They had the awesome responsibility of maintaining and encouraging the worship and service of God. They had a beautiful temple. It must have been immense. It took 46 years to build it. For many Jews this building was the labor of love. They met God in that temple. They sang his praises. They heard his Word. To that temple they had brought their tithes and offerings.

And like our own church, the temple was in constant need of upkeep and repairs. Money had to be raised to pay for the heat and water; the boiler had to be replaced, the whole temple had to be rewired and after 46 years the roof was beginning to leak in places. This awesome house of worship was beautiful but expensive to keep up.

The leaders were aware of their high calling and in their session meetings they wrestled with such tough decisions as "How are people going to bring sacrifices when they come from far away? They can't bring sheep and goats and doves all that way from Syria or Italy. Let's provide a service for the worshipers that will enable them to purchase their sacrificial animals right here. I move that we sell sacrificial kosher animals at a reasonable price and the money that's left over can be used to help pay for the heating, lighting and repairs." They had the best of intentions and they thought, perhaps, this new service might even encourage greater attendance.

Then there was the question of offerings. Most worshippers came to the temple with pagan money inscribed with images of the emperor and pagan gods. The religious leaders were legitimately concerned about violating the second commandment which forbid images. So they came up with a brilliant solution. The temple would mint its own money. Worshippers could exchange their pagan money for temple money which

could be used for their tithes and offerings. Of course there would be a charge for this service. The money-changers would have to be paid. But whatever money was left over could be used for the maintenance and upkeep of the temple.

Again, these leaders had the best of intentions but, slowly, the atmosphere of the temple changed. In the narthex, before the worship service began, arguments broke out over prices and the rate of exchange. The temple began to smell like a barn. The clatter of the market place sounded in the courts of the house of God. The money-changers ripped off innocent pilgrims who had ^{to} travel far to worship in the Temple and the sellers of animals charged outrageous prices. But worst of all the minds of people were so preoccupied with buying and selling that the worship of God was all but overlooked.

I believe the leaders were good people, religious people, every bit as good as you or I. Of course they had faults. We all do. Maybe some of them were greedy. Maybe some of them really didn't care that much about God or the temple. Maybe some of them simply loved the honor of being on the session. Maybe some of them were pompous. Maybe some of them treated their employees without mercy and didn't apply the law of God to their personal lives. But, for the most part, I believe these people were fine upstanding people who had slowly lost sight of the real purpose of the church. That, I believe, is the danger of the church and its leaders in every age.

It all reminds me of a story that I know you've heard before but it's a good one so I will tell it again. Once a woman was walking along the sea-shore at night when she heard the cry of someone drowning. She plunged into the surf and swam out to the drowning man and dragged him

to shore. She administered artificial respiration and the man was saved. Their shared experience gave the two a great concern for the drowning so they decided to walk up and down the shore every night listening for the cries of drowning men and women. Over the years many were saved. Each one of them took their turns walking the shore, day and night, listening for the cries of the drowning. Then they built a club-house where they gathered to celebrate. Their numbers increased so that not everyone was needed for life-guard duty. They raised money to hire full time life-guards. This gave them more time for fellowship in the club-house. There they took courses on life-saving; they argued over various life-saving techniques, but fewer and fewer ever rescued the drowning any longer. As time passed they grew to love one another very much.

Additions were built on to the club-house. The building was beautified with stained glass windows and carpeting. Soon the cost of the upkeep of the building came to take precedent over their original purpose. They started to come to be entertained with special music and comedians. As the cost of the upkeep of the club-house increased they began to drop the life-guards from the budget as an unnecessary expense. In the mean time increasing numbers of young people were getting into water over their heads and drowning but no one seemed to care. Arguments and fights broke out between the members as to how money could be raised to maintain the club-house and the cries of the drowning were no longer heard.

I don't believe that this parable is true of our church yet. It became true for the church of Jesus' day and it can so easily happen again today but I don't believe the elders and deacons of this church have ever completely lost sight of the great ends of the church. This past year the session had several special meetings to remind ourselves of the purpose of

the church and to set priorities for the future. I believe that God is pleased with those priorities. Three priorities were agreed upon. First, the session wants this church to be a house of prayer for all people. The elders recognize that prayer is the source of a church's power, not electricity, and that prayer is an absolute necessity for renewal, revival and growth.

Secondly, the session listed Christian nurture as a top priority. We want our members to grow spiritually and be able to apply the truths of God's word to their marriages, families, work, and leisure; and through this nurturing process we hope to draw others into our fellowship.

Thirdly, the session wants ministry to youth to have a top priority. We are presently in the process of looking for a seminary intern to be with us for a year who will give special emphasis on youth. In two weeks the first applicant for the job will be visiting us for the weekend. She is a seminary student at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This past week I talk with Bob Melone, our summer intern from last year. He gave me the name of a seminary student who may be interested in a summer internship. Pray that the session and the youth involved in the choice will make a good decision. Pray also that God will lead the right young man or woman to apply for this internship.

I believe that this beautiful building has its place in the purpose of God. I am not an iconoclast who wants to do away with buildings and stained glass. I am very much of a traditionalist as you know. These things, for me, are aids to true devotion. But when they become substitutes for true devotion they make God sick at heart and down-right angry. And without prayer, Christian nurture, and investment in the young people of this church this building will share the fate of that ancient

Jewish temple.

Let us, this morning, let God remind us what the business of His church is. It is a great tragedy to gain the world but to lose our souls. It is a tragedy to gain a beautiful sanctuary but to lose our young people. It is a tragedy if we rewire the whole church and yet lack the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a tragedy to pour money into the maintenance of the physical sanctuary if less and less time, money, energy, thought and prayer is spent on building up the true temple of the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ. May the zeal for God's house consume you who are to be ordained and installed as elders and deacons. May the zeal for God's house consume us all. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we pray for your holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen.