

3rd SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY - JANUARY 18, 2026

John 2:13-25

It was the Lord's day and the house church in Ephesus was packed. Around every table in the large room were men and women, Jews and Gentiles, free and slave, eating together as they did every week. A young educated man named Ioannis was eating there too. Ioannis had attended this church ever since he was a small child. And now his formal Greek training, along with his interest in neoplatonist philosophy, hadn't managed to dislodge his faith in Christ from his heart. That seed had been planted too early and too deep. These were Ioannis' people and he loved them.

Now, as the meal was beginning to wind down, an elderly man stood up and everyone in the house fell silent. Everyone knew the man who stood up. His name was Agapitós. At least that's what everyone called him. Agapitós was Greek for beloved and the root of the word Agape. And Agapitós claimed to be one of Jesus' most beloved disciples.

Ioannis was excited. The whole Ephesian church was excited, especially Ioannis. Agapitós was going to tell a story about Jesus. Or as Agapitós liked to call it: testify! If he was asked to tell a story he would say, "I don't tell stories, I testify to things I have seen and heard!"

Then, whenever he would finish telling his story about Jesus, he would always say, "I, Agapitós, testify to these things so that you may believe

that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” And the rest of the church would respond, “And we know your testimony is true!” Ioannis didn’t know how and when that got started but he had grown up with it and he loved it.

Lately, Agapitós had been testifying less frequently because he was getting older, and it was becoming more difficult, especially, since his stories, or testimonies, were quite lengthy and he always insisted on standing. But today was one of those special days he had the strength and everyone was excited to hear him speak.

Agapitós began. “Dear friends, you have heard me testify so many times over the years. I’m not sure I have anything new to say. And yet, I can’t help but feel that even the most well-worn story about Jesus bears repeating. What testimony shall I give you today?” The room was silent for a moment, then Ioannis heard himself blurting out, “Tell us about the temple!”

Agapitós smiled. “What about the temple? I forget you youngsters never saw it before it fell! Shall I tell you how big it was? Shall I tell you of its strange customs? Shall I describe the lamb’s sacrifice?” Now everyone was looking at Ioannis. “No,” he said, “Tell us about the time Jesus entered the temple and drove out those buying and selling.”

“Here is my testimony, regarding the temple... It was the week before

Passover...” “The week Jesus died?” someone asked. “No. Who told you that? No. It was the first of the three Passovers we spent with Jesus. This was at the very beginning of his ministry. We had just spent the week in Cana for the wedding of one of his cousins and Jesus decided to go down to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover.

The thing you have to understand about Jesus is that he loved all the old Judean festivals we had before the temple fell. Jesus loved the temple. He was in the temple any chance he got.”

“Even as a boy, right?” someone said. “I heard when he was a boy he ran away from his parents to go be in the temple...” “That may be so,” said Agapitós, “There are many stories about Jesus, but I can only testify to what I know and what I have seen. Now where was I?” “Jesus loved the temple,” Ioannis said.

“Yes! That, you must understand. Jesus loved the temple. Just as he loved the world. He never came to condemn but to save. But you have to understand: toward the end, after the renovations and expansion under King Herod, the temple was very different than it had been. The temple was once a humble building dedicated solely to the worship of God, but, in its last days, it had become something else entirely. By the end of its almost 50-year renovation it had become a money-making juggernaut.

People were coming from all over the world to gawk at it. And, while there had always been a few tables set up so people could convert their money into temple currency, and so that people who had travelled could buy animals to sacrifice, now the court was full of tables. They were all over the place! See, the court was the area around the temple where anybody was welcome. People used to come there to sit and listen to teaching. There, outsiders who couldn't go inside to offer sacrifices could quietly reflect on Israel's God. Also, the poor, blind, and lame could set up their mats in the court and beg for alms.

But the renovations had changed all that. Now, you walked in the courts and it was indistinguishable from a noisy marketplace. See, Jesus loved the temple. It was his love for what the temple was supposed to be that made him do it!

He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, 'Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!'"

Agapitós thought for a second. "See, there's this old scripture, Psalm 69, it's one of those psalms of lament where David is asking God to save him from danger. It's, you know: the water is up to my neck, my throat is parched, all my enemies hate me — typical Psalm stuff! — but then it says:

“Lord, the LORD Almighty, may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me; “God of Israel, may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me. For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a foreigner to my own family, a stranger to my own mother's children; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.”

I always wonder if David, in the Holy Spirit, was speaking about Jesus. After all, Jesus endured shame and insults. Jesus was stranger to his own people. And, as I said, he loved the temple. He was zealous for it! See, the Judeans knew that it was a prophetic act to clear the temple, so they asked Jesus for some sort of prophetic sign. Maybe they'd heard rumours about him turning water to wine. And maybe they wanted him to do something like that. Jesus told them what the sign would be but they didn't understand. He said, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.'

Now, this may seem clear to you because you grew up hearing our testimonies but what you have to understand is: no one understood what Jesus was saying! It sounded like he was saying that he would rebuild the Jerusalem temple after its destruction. Many will still claim this is an unfulfilled prophecy! But it was only later, after he had been raised from the dead, that we remembered and understood. The temple he was talking about was Jesus' body! He is the true temple!"

Ioannis had heard Agapitós tell this story many times but this time felt different. Somewhere in his heart he knew that it might be one of Agapitós' last times telling it. To stand and speak, which he had once done with such boldness and fervour, now seemed to be a labour. He was taking long pauses between his sentences in order to remember the next one. Ioannis knew that his beloved shepherd, Agapitós' own temple was soon to fall. Many in the Church believed it wouldn't happen. They had convinced themselves that Christ would return first. There was a rumour that Jesus had even promised Agapitós as much. But Ioannis knew that's not what Jesus had actually said.

Ioannis knew in his bones that, in a few years, the Ephesian church, which had been started by the Apostle Paul and had been lovingly shepherded all these years by Agapitós, would be looking for new leadership. But where would they be without any witnesses to the Resurrection? They could continue to read Paul's letters out loud but who would tell Agapitós' stories? How would they be remembered?

Suddenly, Ioannis felt something deep within him prompt *his* heart. Agapitós called it the Advocate. Others called it the Holy Spirit. It was the presence of the Resurrected Christ in his heart. Suddenly, Ioannis understood that his whole life had led up to this moment: his scribal training, his reading of philosophy, his lifelong commitment to the faith of his mother. His very presence here in Ephesus answered his own question!

Ioannis would begin that night. He would begin composing a new Gospel that told the stories the others missed. This Gospel would tell the stories the way Agapitós had told them. But it would also preserve Agapitós' wise teaching about the stories. This Gospel would be less about what Jesus did and more about who he was and what his actions meant. It would be the book of Agapitós' testimony. In this way, his words would live on even after his earthly temple had ceased to be.

As Ioannis began to discern this calling on his life, he started to feel free and light. Finally, like Peter before him, he understood that loving Jesus meant feeding his lambs. And the thought of it filled Ioannis with unspeakable joy.

After a long pause, Agapitós continued, “Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days.’ Friends, this promise, you know, was not just for Jesus’ body but for all our bodies. Each of us who believe in Christ and have faith in his name become children of God. Then we are born from above. Not of water but of the Spirit! We experience abundant life now and in the age to come! Have faith, then, that when your own earthly temples fall, he will rebuild them on the last day. And... And...” Agapitós was now weeping. So was Ioannis. “And love one another as he has loved us.”

Agapitós looked fondly upon the church he had loved and served for so many years, people from all walks of life abiding in Christ's love together.

Agapitós knew that this gathering was the temple Jesus loved most of all. After a long pause, he smiled and said, “I, Agapitós, testify to these things so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” All responded, “And we know your testimony is true!”

The Jerusalem Temple was an awesome structure, covering some 35 acres. It had originally been built by Solomon. However, over the years, it was burned to the ground, rebuilt, desecrated and stripped, cleansed and restored. The temple where Jesus found himself, was the glorious temple begun by Herod the Great. It was not yet completed and was actually finished just a short time before its complete destruction in 70 CE. The Herodian Temple was extremely lavish and more beautiful than the Temple of Solomon.

The picture of Jesus that we see in today’s Gospel is not the gentle, meek and caring shepherd we’re used to. We find an angry, even scary Jesus at the beginning of John’s gospel. While the other gospel writers place this scene in Holy Week, at the beginning of Jesus’ passion, John chose to place this rather disturbing event, right at the start of his gospel. He wanted to help us understand some important aspects of the church and its worship.

The Temple was where people offered sacrifices. Sacrifice was an important component of the life of faith, revealing the depth of one’s

sincerity. The Law specified the sacrifices to be made. Parts of the sacrificed animal's flesh would be offered wholly to God. Other parts would be given to the priests to support them and to provide resources for the poor and needy of the community.

As Jesus walked into this environment, he saw the money-changers and their constantly changing rates of exchange. He heard the noise, the shouting, the bargaining, the bragging, the bleating and the cooing; he smelled the sweat and the dung of the nervous animals, and his anger grew until it erupted!

He grabbed a cord, probably his belt, and he lashed out with it, flailing at the merchants and money changers, tossing over their tables and flinging their coins to the ground. With this very early story, John sets the stage for the sacramental character of the worship life of the church. Jesus had come to replace the sacrificial system of the Hebrew covenant by making the once-and-for-all sacrifice on a cross. Symbolically, Jesus was driving out the old system. At the same time he was making it clear that he was highly displeased that people had turned their sacrifices and their worship into a market place.

John wanted to use this event to establish the fact that Jesus had come to replace the former manner of worship with the sacramental life of the church. Formerly, the people of God had to be reassured of the presence of God by symbols. They had to gather at shrines symbolized

by the Temple; but now they would gain those assurances in Christ himself.

What was important to John was the sacramental character of the church. The sacrificial system that was practised in the Temple was a sign of God's grace and mercy for God's people. The people did not have to make sacrifices to be reminded of God's presence and their access to him. Now it is the Risen Christ who offers his body to us in the Holy Eucharist as the sure sign that he has been sacrificed for us and is present with us. In the giving of that body and blood to us, we are filled with the Presence of the Risen Christ. Together we are his body.

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” No one understood his words at the time, but later, after the resurrection, the disciples remembered and understood. They understood that Jesus was the temple, that in him they met God, talked to God, and experienced God's love and forgiveness. They remembered how he touched people and spoke to them, how he fed the hungry, and gave sight to the blind, how he put truth and justice in their right places and gave peace and joy to those who came near him. They remembered these things, and they remembered his words. As they looked at this death and resurrection, they knew that Jesus was the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.

What is it in our lives that prevents us from knowing him? The power and presence of God is not found in our Bible, nor our hymns, nor in the rituals and observances of our churches.

God's presence and power are found in an encounter with the living Christ, an encounter we can only have through faith and trust and openness to the Spirit of the one who is revealed in the pages of our Bible and spoken of when we gather as God's people. Let us pray for Christ to clear our hearts as he cleared the temple and ask that he guide us in God's way.

Amen.

Patient God, Your son, Jesus expressed anger at abuses and injustice. Help us to show concern, not apathy, for injustice in our world, and teach us to make right all that may be wrong.

Amen.

CELEBRATION OF FAITH AND GRATITUDE

We are a cloth of diverse colours made from many gifts and graces.

We are the people flowing forth from Creator God, surprising ourselves with the things which can be done.

We are raw material for rewarding relationships as our lives interweave, contributing one to the other, holding each other firm when one is weak or breaking.

We are each worthy of being respected and cared for, essential to the pattern, skilled in our appointed tasks, sources of laughter and sharers of tears.

We commit ourselves to work together, that one day, this world may be a place where all people live in justice, freedom and peace.

Make us people who are unafraid to proclaim your healing mercies. Help these gifts to bring hope and comfort to all those in need. In Jesus' Name, we pray.

Amen.

Prayers of the People: Week of Christian Unity

With faith we pray to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us pray for a deeper appreciation of our common baptism into the one body of Christ. Lord, sustain each of us and our communities as we continue on the path towards the unity you desire for all your disciples.

Let us pray for our local Christian communities, our churches and ecumenical groups, that the Spirit may continue to enlighten them and grant them the grace to work in harmony, joy and love.

Let us pray for all civil authorities. Lord, grant that they may work towards justice and peace, and give them the wisdom to attend to the needs of all, especially the homeless, the hungry, the abused, the addicted and the most vulnerable. Guide civic leaders with wisdom and compassion.

Let us pray for all the nations and communities who live with deep divisions and internal conflicts. We pray for the people of Ukraine, Gaza, and Venezuela. We cry out for the precious children of the world in inhospitable places and spaces in South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, Chad, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Yemen, Palestine, and Haiti.

We give thanks for all your blessings. We pray for your church: this assembly; all pastors, deacons, lay leaders, volunteers, council members and musicians. Give this congregation a spirit of discipleship and service.

Loving God, we ask for healing and wholeness for those who are sick; we pray for all who are healing, undergoing surgeries, or therapies. We pray for all doctors, nurses, therapists, and hospice workers.

Let us pray for all those who bring the gospel to bear on the great ethical challenges of our times. Lord, may we each learn to play our part in mitigating the global and ecological disasters which bring human suffering and threaten your creation.

God of Mercy and Care, we pray for humanitarian work in many countries. We pray for philanthropic efforts in nations around the world that help fund food programs, provide clean water, build shelters, and eradicate

diseases. Awaken and employ more philanthropists with increased generosity. We pray for the workers and those who distribute the resources to make wise decisions of focussed care and assistance.

Heavenly Father, you have called us in the Body of your Son Jesus Christ to continue his work of reconciliation and reveal you to the world: forgive us the sins which tear us apart; give us the courage to overcome our fears and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray

Our Father ...