

Third spaces and more (John 2:13-22)

Churches often live in an uneasy relationship with their property.

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I live in a small, picturesque New England town about an hour from Boston. When COVID hit, with the permission to work from home, we saw an influx of new residents from the city. Housing prices soared, with all-cash offers six figures over asking price winning the day. Young families in my church who had been renting while saving for a down payment told me sadly that they had to move further out in order to buy.

Amidst all of this, a church in the middle of downtown closed its doors. Private developers bought it and have pledged to transform it into 11 condominium units. Needless to say, these will not be workforce housing or targeted to first-time homebuyers.

This week's gospel reading is about another sacred building. Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem and, upon seeing the commerce and money changing taking place, overturns tables and runs the bankers out. The marketplace, he says, is now closed. Jesus is "consumed" with "zeal" for God's house.

Churches often live in an uneasy relationship with our property. When I entered ministry, the generation before mine often said we should sell all our buildings because we didn't need them. Now, though, we hear all the time about the importance of "third spaces," places that are neither our homes nor our work places.

Church buildings are more than third spaces. We are not clubhouses or coffeehouses. That said, we are more than just a building so holy that it may only be opened one hour a week. At our best, we are incubators of community that add value and meaning to our neighborhoods.

In a time when the church is right-sizing, however, and adjusting the number of church buildings we have to the number of Christians in our neighborhoods, that means we also need to think about what happens to our communities when we close our doors. Are we turning our property back over to our neighbors in a way that will bless them? Or are we looking for the highest possible bidder and then leaving the block, never to be seen again?

I know what it's like to be a part of a church that closes. The church that sponsored me for ordination grew so small that the presbytery helped us discern it was time to close our doors. The property, in a hip Atlanta neighborhood, could have generated a tidy profit for the presbytery. Instead, the church's long-standing outreach to unhoused men was continued, with a shelter and resource center taking the place of the church.

Our buildings can be a blessing to us, and they can bless our neighborhoods. When it's time for the church to adapt to new realities, we have a chance to show our zeal for God's house one more time—in the way we show our love for our neighbors with the choices we make for it.