

Lent 3
March 4, 2018

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This morning we heard the Ten Commandments as our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, and then the story of the “cleansing of the Temple” from John as our Gospel reading.

The story of the “cleansing of the Temple” is found in all four gospels. However, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the event happens at the end of the story ... after Jesus enters Jerusalem just before his crucifixion. In Matthew, Mark and Luke the “cleansing of the Temple” becomes a primary reason for Jesus to be arrested which leads to his crucifixion. However, in John’s gospel the story of the cleansing of the Temple happens at the very beginning of his ministry. In John’s gospel it becomes a prediction of his death and resurrection at the opening of the larger story as if it is a lens through which to view the life of Jesus.

As the text from John’s gospel tells us Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. At that time, the temple building constituted the essence of Jewish faith in both literal and symbolic ways. It was a bustling hub of commercial activity, with crowds of worshippers, historical memory, and architectural splendor. It was not just a religious holy site ... it was an institution, and it had institutional needs. In the temple, Jesus encountered people selling animals to the pilgrims who needed them to make their obligatory sacrifices. The money changers were there too, for worshippers also needed to exchange their Roman currency into Jewish money in order to pay the temple tax in the coinage of the "sanctuary shekel." These merchants and money changers served the institution as well as provided a means by which the pilgrims could fulfill their religious obligations.

At some point ... as Jesus encountered all this religiously-oriented "business" ... he became mildly upset. Well ... maybe more than mildly upset. He lost it and all hell broke loose. Enraged at what he saw, Jesus improvised a whip, thrashed the animals and drove them from the temple, scattered the coffers of the money changers, and overturned their tables: "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" he screamed.

So, what was Jesus thinking as he wreaked such havoc in the temple that day? Maybe his objection was to any and all commercial activity in the temple, even honest transactions that were necessary for pilgrims to fulfill their religious obligations. Or, maybe he detested the exploitation and avarice of the religious authorities who controlled all access to ritual purity. This are how the Church usually answers the question ... how most preachers interpret the story. Thus ... in this scenario Jesus was the righteous One who was protecting his “Father’s house” from those taking advantage of the pilgrims coming to the Temple for Passover.

Maybe that is a part of it, but I think there is more. Throughout the gospels Jesus teaches ... by word and example ... about an un-brokered relationship with God. By that I mean that he taught the people he encountered that they were blessed children of God and therefore could know the fullness of life that God gave them. The people of God did not need a priest or the Temple to access a relationship with the divine. All people could have an experience of the holy where they lived ... regardless of their station in life ... regardless of whether they were ritually pure or not ... regardless of their means to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Let's take a look at the healing stories in the gospels. In all the stories about someone being healed Jesus does not take credit for the healing, rather he tells those who are healed that it is their faith ... their confidence that God wants them to be more than who they are at that moment ... that is what makes them well. It is not Jesus' faith that makes them well ... it is their faith. And it is not faith in Jesus, but faith in life itself ... life given by God.

Let's back up a moment to the Ten Commandments. The way these are understood by almost everyone is that Moses went up on the mountain and God carved these Ten Commandments into two stone tablets. Moses came down the mountain and told the Israelites that this is what God said ... do it or else! In the Book of Deuteronomy the Ten Commandments even take on a law book approach. There are consequences if you break these Commandments. Kind of like if you speed 15 miles per hour over the speed limit it will cost you \$100. That is the way most people understand the Ten Commandments.

And, the Ten Commandments have taken on a life of their own ... they have become an end in themselves. First it was the Ten Commandments, and then 613 mitzvot. Mitzvot are the commandments like not eating pork, or weaving two different threads like cotton and wool together. These became the beginning of a system of ritual purity that separated people into those who were considered clean and unclean. Abide by these laws or else! And today, the Ten Commandments become literal monuments. Remember Roy Moore who was recently running for a Senate seat from Alabama. He was the one charged with dating under-aged girls. Before all that happened he had placed a two-and-a-half ton granite monument ... with the Ten Commandments carved into it ... on the lawn of the Alabama State Supreme Court building. It was declared unconstitutional. So, Roy Moore put it on a flatbed tractor-trailer truck and hauled it around the country. If that isn't an end in itself I don't know what is.

But, what if these Ten Commandments were seen more as "best practices?" "Best practices" is a contemporary business concept directing one to a more functional and effective system. What if, instead of hearing the Ten Commandments as "Thou shalt not ... or else!" ... what if one were to hear them as "Wisdom has taught us that when we do these things our life is better"? Sages and prophets continue to remind us that when we follow these best practices of life, the community thrives ... when we don't the community suffers. The difference is that in the first case ... Ten Commandments as strict laws with consequences ... and they become an end in themselves. In the second case ... Ten Commandments seen as "best practices" ... they are a means to the fullness of life. It may seem like a subtle difference, yet I believe it is a profound distinction.

The way I see it, in the case of Jesus cleansing the Temple, it wasn't just that the merchants of cattle, and goats, and pigeons were making money off these poor pilgrims, or that the money changers were skimming off the top ... all that was to be expected, even by the pilgrims. The problem for Jesus was that the Temple sacrifices had become an end in itself rather than a means to access the holy and sacred. The priests in the Temple, and by association the merchants and money changers, had become the go-betweens. This enterprise was business as usual. The Temple commerce had become an end in itself rather than what it was originally intended to be ... a means by which people could access the holy. Jesus came along and said business as usual did not have to be that way.

So what does all this have to do with you and me? Well, the institution of the Church ... as we know it today ... is not much different from the Temple in Jesus' day. The pilgrims who went to Jerusalem for Passover desired an experience of God ... of the holy ... the divine ... of something sacred in their lives. I imagine that many found it ... it was a holy place and had been for a very long time. But Jesus saw the institution ... at least part of it ... as a stumbling block to those who wanted or needed a direct, un-brokered relationship with God.

Today, people come to this church ... and lots of others ... because they want to know something holy and sacred in their lives. Sometimes, in spite of itself, the Church gets in its own way. The institutional needs of the community become such a priority that instead of inviting people into a relationship with God the institutional needs act as a barrier. The institution becomes an end in itself, and the people suffer.

Let me provide one example: In many Episcopal Churches, but not all, the sacrament of Holy Communion is offered to "all who are baptized." That is an institutional need. To define its membership the Church has to have a threshold of who is "in" and who is "out." It rewards those who are "in" ... those who are baptized ... with access to the holy ... the sacrament of Holy Communion.

But is someone shows up and crosses the threshold of our doorway at St. Cyprian's that tells me that they are seeking something that is sacred and holy in their lives. So, who am I to deny them access to God? Indeed, I feel it is my responsibility to provide whatever means possible to encourage that journey in faith. That is why ... at St. Cyprian's at least ... all persons who are worshipping with us are welcome to receive our holy food for holy people.

I believe that where the Church can provide the means to a relationship with God it will thrive. That means is not the Church itself, rather it is the way the people of that community of faith act towards each other ... and how they act towards the stranger as well. It is the way the community brings healing to those who are broken in body and spirit ... offering healing by encouraging their faith. It is the way the people share each other's' burdens and sorrows ... and joys and victories. It is the way the community invites each individual to a fullness of life through taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. When people live in abundance their love overflows.

This particular church of St. Cyprian's is a holy place. This sacred space that we now occupy has heard the prayers of people seeking God for well over a century. It has lived with the tears and laughter, the anger and forgiveness, the love and the pain for many generations. And that spirit is still here every time we occupy this space ... it is here for us to absorb and then show forth in our own lives.

This Lent I invite you to think outside the box. Don't allow business as usual to rule the day. Seek to see this season as a time to live out the best practices of the community of faith. Don't make your faith an end in itself, rather seek to find that un-brokered relationship with God. Look around you and find the holy and sacred in your own life.

The cleansing of the temple is a stark warning against every false sense of security ... against every nice-and-neat box we try to stick Jesus into for our own comfort. Jesus comes to challenge rather than to reinforce our prejudices and illusions. Jesus comes to make unfamiliar what institutional religion wants to make safe and cozy. Remember, Jesus never once said, "understand me." He said something far more radical. "Follow me." Let's take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Amen.