

“An Open Welcome”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
III Lent – 3 & 4 March 2018
John 2:13-22

It’s a little distressing, this scene of Jesus in a rage cleansing the Temple, tossing over tables, brandishing a whip, creating chaos. That’s not how we tend to think of him, and we wonder why Jesus lost his temper. After all, the moneychangers and animal sellers served a vital purpose. They insured that people gave God a worthy sacrifice on high holy days like Passover.

The Law of Moses required that animals sacrificed on the altar be without blemish. So having a ready supply of certified pure sheep and doves and cattle was helpful. Likewise with the moneychangers, the coins in general circulation bore the face of the Emperor, an idolatrous graven image that violated the second commandment. You couldn’t use these tainted coins as an offering to God, so people swapped them for silver shekels that lacked offensive imagery – shekels minted precisely for this purpose.

Of course, this monopoly probably bred corruption. It’s easy to imagine price gouging and ridiculous exchange rates and fees, but that’s not what bothered Jesus. He didn’t demand that they trade fairly or close up shop. He just wanted them to leave, to relocate outside the Temple precincts. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” That sacred space was dedicated to prayer and worship and sacrifice, not commerce. Anything else acted as an obstacle that interfered with people seeking a closer relationship with God.

What Jesus said and did upset plenty of people, and they reasonably wanted a sign, some proof of authority, to justify his behavior and explain why they should listen to him. His answer baffled them. “Tear it all down, stone from stone, this mountain of a structure that took 46 years

to build, and I'll restore it in three days." Taken literally, that's insane, but John explained that, "he was speaking of the temple of his body," his forthcoming resurrection from the dead.

Now this was a truly radical claim, much more so than making a mess of the market. Here Jesus claimed that he would someday replace the Temple as the dwelling place of God. His risen body would become the new vessel through which people could access God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. That was an astonishingly blasphemous idea. Even his own disciples didn't comprehend what Jesus meant until after the resurrection.

But in Christ's risen body, they saw every obstacle to God shattered: no more walls, no more gates, no more shuffling through the bottleneck of a crowded marketplace. No more obstacles, just the freedom to follow where Jesus leads, and the opportunity, the privilege, to sacrifice self, soul and body, all of who we are and have in gratitude and in imitation of the only sacrifice that could save the world. No more obstacles, just Jesus with open arms, welcoming all who receive him into life reborn forever.

Of course, some obstacles do remain, chief among them sin. Pride blocks humility, and we lose sight of how we depend on God alone. So we forget to ask forgiveness, and freedom escapes us. Fear barricades faith, and we avoid the risk of following Jesus, preferring a safer path of our own devising, which takes us nowhere. A sense of scarcity builds a tall, thick wall against generosity, depriving us of the joy of giving.

Jesus has broken these barriers down, too. He conquered sin on the cross, reconciling us with God, but sin – knowing it's beaten – still strives to throw up obstacles to exact whatever retribution it can to compensate for its defeat. In the end, Jesus' triumph will be fulfilled, faith will conquer, hope win, but why wait for the end, when the grace of repentance bears the power to break down the barriers now?

When we welcome Jesus into our lives, and open our hearts for him to operate freely, he opens up the Way, and the pile of rubble he leaves behind from the obstacles he removes serves as a witness to others that what we confess with our lips actually happens in our lives. People need to be free and at peace, to feel real hope, and Jesus has chosen us to serve as witnesses of his love, to shout with word and deed, “Look! Over here! The Way is open! You are welcome!”

We already offer **An Open Welcome** very well. People who visit here consistently speak of the genuine hospitality they experience, and for this reason, above all others, the vast majority return and become part of our faith family. This authentic welcome is not something you can engineer with some clever program. It’s a natural, or rather supernatural, grace that abides at St. Luke’s, and the sense of connection and belonging we share leads to humble service in ministry, fruits of the Spirit that nourish us and also bear seeds for even greater growth in the Kingdom.

Yet we know only too well that there are obstacles interfering with the open welcome we want to offer. These barriers made of brick and mortar, wood and steel, contradict who we are as a hospitable people and place an artificial limit on our ability to grow, both spiritually and numerically. They block the Way.

Most of our spaces are closed off to people with mobility issues. That’s not **An Open Welcome**, but an elevator, more handicapped parking, and ramps for easier access will change that. Our fellowship gatherings are increasingly overcrowded. A packed house is a great blessing. It reveals the energy and joy of our parish. But hospitality starts with a place to sit, and seats are often in short supply. Expanding Board Hall will change that.

When parents with infants or toddlers come to worship, they must travel a confusing, convoluted route to find our nursery, and once they get there, they find a portable crib in a corner, obviously an afterthought. Our space for Children's Chapel consists of a small altar crammed in a corner of Board Hall between a stack of chairs and a radiator. This lack of dedicated space for infants, toddlers, and small children sends a message about how we value children that's completely contradictory to how we really feel.

In 2017, 3 out of 4 families who worshipped with us and responded to our follow-up calls or e-mails joined the parish, a remarkably high proportion and a sign of God's love coursing through St. Luke's. However, among parents with small children, only 1 family out of 4 stayed. Do we have bad teachers, bad curriculum, a parish full of people who obviously dislike children intensely, or might our spaces play a significant role in the welcome people feel? Dedicated and well-located rooms for nursery, children, and youth will help us clearly and concretely convey that people of all ages have a place here.

These and other unmet needs, like more bathrooms, a home for our music program, more suitable areas for community groups to gather, have obstructed God's mission for us for many years, but this is the year when we choose, by the grace of God, to break down those barriers and open up so that we can offer an even greater welcome than ever before.

To do this will take all of us, spending serious time in prayer, seeking guidance from God on how we might answer the call to sacrifice generously – not equal gifts, but equal sacrifice – over and above what we already give to support the ministry of our parish. Together, we need to raise \$2 million.

That's an intimidating figure, but over the past several weeks, we've encouraged a small handful of parishioners to make advanced commitments to this project. \$2 million is a lot of

money, but it's a lot less intimidating when you know that we're already about halfway there. Yes, you heard me correctly. We're about half the way there, but now we need everyone. I believe that all of us, pulling together, can get us the rest of the way.

For each of us, this journey will differ somewhat and lead us to various places, and from personal experience, I can tell you that it will not be easy. For about month, Stephanie and I have prayed and talked together about where we believe God is leading us, about what sort of sacrificial offering we might make. We enjoy giving, but we've really struggled.

In two years, Ben will enter college, and two years after that, Emma will, too. We've got a car with over 200,000 miles on it. We're praying hard for it to last. Stephanie works in the public schools, so right now, with the legislation pending in the General Assembly, there's a lot of uncertainty about her retirement benefits, and then there are the unknown unknowns of the future that we all face.

So to make an offering that feels faithful to us, we've decided to do a few things over the next three years. First, we're going to transfer some of our retirement savings from a 401(k) to St. Luke's. Second, I'm going to reduce contributions to my 403(b), which is the non-profit version of a 401(k), and give that toward the capital campaign. Third, we'd planned on taking the kids to England next summer, but we're letting go of that aspiration to pursue one that means much more to us. Some have voiced concerns that this could compromise our financial future, and I appreciate that kind concern, but for us, St. Luke IS our future.

For each person in our parish, the nature of the sacrifice will vary, and the amounts will not be the same. Once again I emphasize that this prayerful process leads not to equal gifts but to equal sacrifice, all of us guided to what that means by the grace of God. But with each sacrifice inspired by God, each gift offered in the grace of God, the obstacles will come tumbling

down, and we will draw closer to God and draw closer to **An Open Welcome** that will draw others closer to God, not just next year or the year after that, but for generations to come, leaving a legacy that will last. Right now, we worship in a beautiful space, because over 100 years ago, a small group of people got together, sacrificed, and built it. It's our turn.

Jesus broke many barriers, sometimes in scandalous ways, to welcome us and open the Way. His sacrifice is irreplaceable and unrepeatable. We owe him everything, an unrepayable debt. All Jesus asks is that we follow, wherever he may lead, as best we can. May God lead us to the joy of generous sacrifice, to a confident faith that empowers us to take risks together, and to a shared vision for the future that will make St. Luke's an ever better version of itself as a people of radical hospitality that serve as a witness to God's mercy, grace, and unbounded love. Amen.