

Lent III

The Path, Ch. 18

Sermon, 3-4-18

This morning we are continuing our recent practice of a “double dose” of Jesus as we read through *The Path* and continue to read our assigned lectionary Gospel. This past week we read chapter 18. There are so many options that we could choose as our extra Gospel reading today. I chose a well-known story to complement the lectionary Gospel for today.

Both stories have to do with the Temple in Jerusalem. It is hard for most of us to imagine the importance of the Temple for the Jewish people in Jesus’ day. It was layered with meaning that went back to the original Temple’s construction, a time of God’s special blessing under King David and King Solomon. The first Temple became a symbol of the Jewish people’s downfall as they were defeated and sent into exile and the original Temple destroyed. And after their return from exile, the rebuilding of the Temple became a sign of the Jewish people’s resilience and hope in God despite the defeat they had experience.

By the time of Jesus, the temple represented all that history and more. It was an important place to worship and honor God and to hear from teachers like Jesus. The Temple had also become a place that was filled with distractions from its original purpose—it became harder to be a place to worship and thank God and build a community of faith.

You see, some of the religious leaders had lost the point of the Temple. They got busy with the details, the functions required, to operate the Temple. They had quite an operation—people exchanging Roman money for special Temple coins and clean, sacrificial animals. An area of the Temple originally designated as “the court for the Gentiles”—i.e., a place where non-Jewish people could gather to pray—had been turned into a religious bazaar, filled with all sorts of animals and haggling. This loss of its original purpose made Jesus so angry that he drove out all the distractions. The same basic account is told in all four Gospels, so it is important.

This story concludes with an even more radical point. Jesus explains there is another type of temple that is not limited to buildings—it will be centered upon his resurrected body. Later his disciples would come to understand this new temple as they would gather in homes and catacombs and other places to worship God and experience and share God’s mercy in the Spirit of the risen Jesus.

The story I chose from *The Path* helps us to see the Temple as a place where Jesus helps to fulfill its original purpose despite the bad intentions of those in charge. In this story, Jesus was teaching early one morning in the Temple. He had a large crowd around him. And as Jesus taught, some of the religious leaders tried to spring a trap against Jesus. To do that, they used someone as a prop for their agenda—their attempt to undermine Jesus and his message.

As the story goes, a woman was caught in adultery (the unasked questions in the story include, “Where was the man she was committing adultery with? Why did he get away?”). The people in power didn’t really care about her or the specifics of the case or even what the right outcome would be. They were simply using the woman as a way to trap Jesus. Either way, they hoped to undermine Jesus.

You see, if Jesus’ reply to their question would have been, “Stone her,” he would lose his reputation as a compassionate man of the people. If he said, “Let her go,” the religious leaders would use it against him with those who were religious conservatives. Jesus seemed to be trapped in a “no win” situation.

However, as Jesus so often did, he turned their question and sprung their trap on them. His answer was so brief yet filled with wisdom and grace. Jesus took a risk and invited those without sin to be her executioners. He had a wise hunch that even these powerful religious leaders would be humbled by the truth of their shared sinfulness.

So how do these two ancient stories help us to understand our purpose as a community of faith? How do we understand and use this beautiful building that was just recently expanded? How do we understand our life and ministry together as followers of our Risen Lord?

First, we learn we are to make room. In the biblical story, the religious leaders and their followers had crowded out people, those they considered “outsiders,” even though they wanted to use their space according to God’s original purpose. We need to remember that lesson when we gather as God’s people. All are welcome here whether we are gathering for worship or simply opening our doors so this space can be used by others.

So when someone visits here, let’s remember to reach out to them and greet them warmly and include them in our common life and ministry at the pace they want. Let us never exclude someone based on how they look or what they believe. Each person on this earth is God’s child. This place is God’s house—not ours. So all are welcome here. This may cause us some growing pains—but those pains that come from expanding our understanding of God’s grace allow us to grow as people of faith.

This same spirit guides us as we open this building to those that are not members of our church—four AA groups each week; our Family Promise clients four times a year; and the children and youth receiving tutoring help every Thursday evening through Mentor Me. Whether they ever become Episcopalians, people can experience God’s lovingkindness here because we remember our original purpose-- this is God’s house for all God’s people.

Second, this gathering place is not about dividing people over hot button issues. People will call me at times and asked what I call “litmus test” questions: what do we believe about a divisive controversy. To me, it feels like what those religious leaders did with the woman caught in adultery. What will be our stand and how can it be used to divide us?

What I say is that everyone is welcome at this church. People who hold one or the other point of view are welcome in God's house. The one threshold rule for our common life is that we show respect to those with whom we differ. When God's people gather, we can hold different views and still worship together, receive God's mercy, and build real relationships over time. That is how we grow in God's grace.

To be clear, social issues are important. I have personal opinions and the Episcopal Church has taken stands on certain issues, such as being against the death penalty. Taking a stand as citizens and as people of faith is often needed. But when we gather here as God's people, this is a space to come together and worship God. This is a place where we can provide a forum to listen to one another so we can grow in understanding and care for one another (even those with whom we disagree). That is how we are God's temple today.

We can do this because—like those religious leaders trying to trick Jesus so many years ago—we have come to realize that we are all sinners. We can do this because-- like the mercy Jesus conveyed to that woman caught in adultery—our sins are not the last word about us. We gather to experience, give thanks, and share God's mercy and forgiveness. Understanding this truth inspires us to live differently not only as we gather here but as we take the message of God's love outside these walls. We are part of that living temple that radiates from our Risen Lord.

My prayer for our congregation is that we are always a place where people can gather, even when we disagree. That we can remain focused on worship of God and giving thanks for all that God has done-- and continues to do-- for us. And that wherever we are on life's journey, we feel welcomed here and find our gathering together to be a source of grace and renewal in our lives. Amen.