

March 8, 2015 3 Lent yr B

John 2: 13-22

Have you ever been angry? Really angry? Been a recipient of anger? Have you ever gotten or given the Georgia 400 salute? Have you been that angry? Remember your first fight? Not too proud of mine. Have you been that angry? I remember a lector years ago who announced a reading from Paul's letter to the Philippino's. Probably unhappy with himself but maybe not angry. Raise your hand if you've ever thrown a ball glove, tennis racket or golf club. More than once!? I had a roommate in college that punched a hole in the wall of our room in the fraternity house. He was angry.

Every day we see anger acted out in our community: road rage, family violence. People out of control. People who leave victims in the wake of their anger. Maybe you have punished yourself, become angry at your failings, shortcomings or misdeeds.



In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus in the temple and he is angry, it is not an emotion we see very often in our Lord. Our image of Christ is calm and cool. He's above the fray. The kind and good Shepherd. The teachings to forgive 7 X 70, to turn the other cheek. So this incident is a jolt. A flaw in the fabric. What the heck is going on here?

John places this story at the beginning of his gospel, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But the synoptic gospels place the story of the temple cleansing at the end, as a precursor to the passion, in holy week. For the synoptic Gospels, this Passover story is one of the reasons for the trial, for the persecution of Jesus.

Yet John lays his cards down quickly. He wants us to connect from the very beginning with who Jesus is, by whose authority Jesus acts as he does in the temple. John right away identifies Jesus as the Messiah. And his audience and Jesus' audience remembered the OT prophecies.

In Malachi is the passage “I am sending my messenger who will clear a path before me” and “he will purify the Levites and cleanse them”. In Psalm 69, “bitter enemies of thy temple tear me in pieces”. John gets their attention.

The Feast of the Passover is a most holy of holidays. It celebrates the saving of the Jews from destruction in Egypt and their passage back to Israel. At the Passover, all men over 19 were required to pay a temple tax and all Jews who lived within about 15 miles of the temple had to make a pilgrimage to the temple. In reality, many Jews all over the Middle East and Mediterranean area came to Jerusalem for the Passover. So Jesus came too.

The temple tax was a half shekel, worth about 6 cents. A days wage was about 4 cents, so this was nor an insignificant amount. Many types of money were in circulation, Greek coinage, Roman coinage. But the tax had to be paid in the coin of the temple, the Jewish currency. So there were money changers, not unlike the offices that change dollars into the currency of the local country when we travel overseas. It cost a penny to change a half shekel and another penny if more than a half shekel of change was given. It cost at least 16% to make change. The temple tax was a profit center.

The Jews also made sacrifice for the Passover and the dove was the choice of the poor. Outside the temple a dove might be a penny, but inside it could cost as much as three weeks wages. If a dove was brought in from outside the temple, a penny was charged for inspection. Almost always the dove was declared unclean and a dove from inside the temple had to be purchased at a much higher price. All this took place

inside the walls of the temple. A religious ritual was again a profit center.

So understand Jesus' anger. The house of his Father was desecrated by a market place. The temple, a place of grace and love, a place of worship was a place of bargaining and shouting, of bleating, it had the smell of a barnyard. The poor taken advantage of and marginalized. The coffers of the temple expanded on the backs of the needy. The spilling of the blood, the sacrifice in the temple, for years the prophets had railed against sacrifice to the Jewish people. It was unnecessary and it became not an act of worship, but an act of repetition. God himself said so. In both Jeremiah and in Hosea God rebukes the practice of animal sacrifice.

In addition, the entrance to the temple, the Court of the Gentiles where the moneychangers and the sellers set up their tables, was an unwelcome place for the Gentiles. Where were the Gentiles who sought the Lord to find a place of peace?

So Jesus boils over. His very long fuse is lit and it burns quickly. Jesus makes a whip of cords and raising it above his head he turns over the tables, scattering the coins, driving the moneychangers and the sellers from the temple. Can't you just see the rage on his face.

Jesus shouts out that the temple priests had made his FATHER'S house into a marketplace, a den of robbers depending on the translation. They mocked Jesus. Just as they did at the trial. This man was claiming divine authority, to be the Messiah. Show us a sign they said...for they were wary of the many false prophets. "Destroy this place and I will raise it in three days".

Now the Jews thought Jesus was literally meaning the tearing down of the temple. The walls and roof tumbling down. Total destruction. And they branded Jesus as a blasphemer who said he could build the whole thing back in three days. All through the passion story, this temple phrase echos and resonates. The false witness at the trial proclaiming “he said he would tear down the temple and rebuild it in 3 days”. The passers by at the crucifixion calling out “you who would destroy the temple and build it in 3 days save yourself”. John, coming along 70 years later, ties together the imagery of the three days and the the resurrection. To John, the temple is the body of Christ.

What Jesus meant was that all the sacrifice, all the taxing and all the finery of the temple was not important and in fact got in the way of the people's relationship with God. It got in the way of their worship. Jesus spoke of the messianic temple. John clearly understood the passage to mean that after the resurrection, Jesus would be with each of us everywhere, always. Jesus is the temple.

For the gift of the resurrection of Christ transcends the marble, the bricks and mortar; the animal sacrifice and the imposed temple tax. The temple cleansing is like our own baptism, the cleansing of our body from sin. We cast away sin and become new, become a member of the body of Christ.

Our relationship with God is not contingent on anything man can build nor pay in a tax. It is a new path of worship, not one understood by the temple priests. Our focus on the cross is a sign of the wisdom and power of God. In the new temple we are cleansed of sin through the death and resurrection, through the cross. Thank you Jesus.

What does the temple incident mean for us? Think about our temple, this house of worship. In our Court of the Gentiles, is the stranger welcome? Do we open our doors to the 70% of our community that are unchurched? Do we marginalize the person in prison, the poor, the gay person or the person of a different color? Do we go through the motions of worship? Do we place more emphasis on things than on spirituality, prayer, community and worship?

What of our personal temple? Lent is a time of preparation, a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. It is a time of reflection on our innermost self. What

is it that might get in the way, between us and Jesus?

Do we worship the idols of materialism? Maybe now in Lent it is easier to re evaluate our needs. Like Jesus, can we take out our whip of cords and drive out the temptations, drive out prejudice, addiction and indifference from our temple?

Let the church, let our church be a place of shelter, a place to get our priorities in order, a place to keep God first. Celebrate, be lifted up and strengthened by Grace freely given and by the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

This Holy Lent I invite you to turn over the tables of the moneychangers, chase out the sellers and cleanse your temple. Amen.