

Lent 3B, Saint John's Olney, 4 March 2018
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen
Exodus 20:1-17; Ps 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

S.D.G.

Not far from here, hanging in the National Gallery of Art, is the painting "Christ Cleansing the Temple" by El Greco. This dramatic image portrays an angry Christ driving the moneychangers from the Temple; it is an image that has always challenged me because on the surface it looks as if Christ has resorted to violence.

With a whip in his hand, bare chested men and partially clad women are cowering before Jesus. A few wise looking men (you can tell them by their beards) seem poised to ask "what sign can you show us for doing this?" The setting and the people look far more like Italian Renaissance than biblical era Temple goers.

What is missing from this image are the cattle, sheep, and doves; these animals are a necessary part of the Temple fund raising efforts. Only unblemished animals and shekels were permitted for Temple sacrifice. So those who visited the Temple had to exchange their Roman coins with its image of the emperor, or their Greek coins with its pagan images, for a plainly marked shekel so they could pay the temple tax. There was of course a fee associated with the currency exchange.

When someone brought an animal to offer for a sacrifice it had to be inspected to assure that it was unblemished, not surprisingly, few animals ever passed inspection. But not to be deterred, unblemished animals were available for sale at the Temple.

Custom had placed the sale of animals and the exchange of money outside the Temple precincts, but convenience, and likely control by the high priest Caiaphas, brought it inside the walls. The sale of animals and the exorbitant exchange rates were good business for Caiaphas and his family as they controlled this profit making endeavor; and the disruption of this was reason enough for Caiaphas to seek Christ's death.

In the painting and the Gospel story Jesus was notably, and rightfully agitated; God's house is no place for commerce or government.

El Greco's image though is misleading. Scholars do not believe that Jesus used the whip on the money changers, rather more accurate translations place the emphasis on driving the animals out with a whip. One translation clearly states it this way *"And, having fashioned a stockwhip out of cords, he drove all of both the sheep and oxen out of the Temple; he also spilled out the coins and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, And said to those selling doves, 'Take these away from here: do not make my Father's house a house for merchandise.'"*

Jesus' zeal was driven up to the verge of violence, but he stopped short of violence. The image we have from El Greco of Jesus using the whip on the moneychangers was a mid-16th century theme that was a commentary on the cleansing of the Roman Catholic church following the Protestant Reformation. scholars and good theology tell us that Jesus did not strike those who defiled the Temple.

Jesus stopped short of violence, but he still restored his Father's house to be a house of worship. Jesus stopped short of violence, but he still changed the existing culture and restored the priority of worshiping God. Violence begets more violence. Violence is never the answer, but righteous indignation works just fine.

The image of Jesus using a whip has always been troubling to me; but this example of his righteous indignation can lead us forward to speak out against those who pervert the Gospel, speak out against those who do violence to creation or humankind, speak out against those who corrupt the worship of God.

The worship of God should always be at the forefront. Worship is not about us, it is about God. Going to church is not about us, it is about God. Being the church is not about us, it is about getting out of the way and letting God shine through our works.

A little righteous indignation is a good thing to overturn the tables of the money changers and drive out those who worship false gods. Speak out, write letters, march and change the world, change God's temple to be a place of worship, a place of love, a place of peace.

Amen,

