

Sunday, March 4, 2018
Third Sunday in Lent (Year B)
Exodus 20.1-17; John 2.13-22
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Thus far during this Lenten season, the lectionary has incorporated scripture readings that focus on our covenant with God. Readings that focus on providing parameters for relationship with God. That makes sense as Lent is a time when we intentionally focus on our relationship with God.

Our Old Testament reading is one of the major covenants between God and his people – the giving of the Ten Commandments. The laws that would be foundational to the Jewish religion, the nation of Israel, and indeed, would come to be considered a bedrock of western society. Comprising a mere 10 of the 613 laws God actually gave to his people, these are considered the “biggies.” They are significant in terms of the scope and magnitude of the issues covered, but also in terms of how they are presented.

The Ten Commandments are more than just a list of laws. Just look at the preface to the commandments. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20.2). God proclaims that they are to keep these laws because of what he has done for the people. That he has saved them, protected them, and cared for them. In response, they are given these commandments and are to follow them, not just because they are good ideas for life in community, but as a sign of their relationship with God and one another.

The commandments deal first with our relationship with God and only then with our relationship with each other. So central is the relationship between God and his people that the first four commandments deal with human-divine relationship and interaction, starting with the premise that God alone is worthy of worship. So critical is this relationship that over half the words of the Ten Commandments are devoted to our relationship with God. The rest shape relations among God’s people. Flowing from God, the life of the community flourishes when it is based on and lived in honesty, trust, fidelity, and respect for life, family, and property. The underlying implication of these commandments, and the way they are structured, is that God alone has worthy of worship. Therefore, we are to let nothing else claim first place in our lives. Not our work, not our desires, not our false idols, not our worldly gods.

In our Gospel reading for today, we can see the ramifications of these commands to love God, of how to love and honor God, of how to be in relationship with God, intersecting with how we are to love, honor, and be in relationship with others. Specifically, we can see something of what those commandments regarding loving and honoring God and others mean in light of a specific example of how NOT to do those things.

In our reading from the Gospel according to John, Jesus is visiting the temple in Jerusalem during Passover. He is disturbed by what he sees. There in the courtyard of the temple are merchants selling animals for sacrifice. There are moneychangers. As we heard, he flies into a

rage, turns over the tables, drives out the merchants and moneychangers, and exclaims, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (Jn 2.16b).

It is interesting to note that the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – place this event at the end of Jesus’ life, thus providing a possible explanation for his arrest. John, on the other hand, place the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of his public ministry, thereby providing a context for his entire mission and ministry. An action identifying the mission of Jesus as a new proclamation of a renewed commitment to the love and worship of God. Regardless of where this event actually occurred in Jesus’ life, his actions and his words are telling. In them, he reveals his identity as the Son of God and gives albeit an oblique reference to what will happen at the end of his life: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2.19).

When Jesus throws the merchants out of the temple, he is, from his unique perspective as Son of God, upholding the first four commandments regarding the primacy of our relationship with God and how we engage in that relationship. He is defending the worship of God alone and rejecting the ways commercial activities and the accompanying thirst for profit can and do become our gods.

Now, to be sure, the merchants and the moneychangers did perform a needed service at the temple. First the moneychangers. All men over the age of 20 were required to pay an annual temple tax of half a shekel. This payment had to be made in the Israeli shekel, not the money of the Roman occupation, which had an image of the emperor on it. Since the Romans considered the emperor a god, their money was considered profane and offensive. Therefore, the civil currency had to be converted into the shekel to pay the tax. And of course, there were generally very steep exchange rates, plus a fee for each transaction.

Then there were the offerings to be made at the temple altar. Such offerings, or sacrifices, were generally made for atonement of sins and other infractions, for purification, or as thank offerings for blessings received. Some offerings required the giving of grain, meal, wine, or incense. But some offerings required the sacrifice of specifically designated animals – doves, goats, lambs, or bulls. And in accordance with the Law, not any old dove or goat or bull would do. The sacrificial animal had to meet certain specifications and be free from blemish. Particularly to insure that the animals used for sacrifices met all the legal requirements and thereby were not offensive to God, it was best to purchase them at the temple. And of course, the convenience, not to mention the premium quality of the animal, added to the value. So the vendors charged much higher prices, providing themselves with a substantial profit margin.

This was the system of commerce that was overlaid on the temple in Jerusalem. A system that required the changing of money. At a cost. That required the purchase of animals for sacrifice. At a marked-up cost. Where merchants were making a substantial profit off the backs of the poor. Making it even more onerous for the poor to fulfill their religious obligations. Obligations mandated by Jewish law. And, of course, the temple authorities took a tidy little percentage in return for allowing these commercial enterprises to occur in the temple precinct. The moneychangers, merchants, and even the temple authorities, were effectively thieves, robbing the people, but also robbing God of the honor due to him by using his house for unholy

purposes. As Jesus saw it, this system, with its emphasis on greed and profit, made a mockery of the true spiritual worship that should have been taking place at the temple. This was undoubtedly contrary to the foundational laws of the faith – the Ten Commandments. Depending on your interpretation, I would argue that the merchants, the moneychangers, and the temple authorities profiting from their enterprises were breaking two of the commandments (either directly or indirectly) and bending three more. These practices not only made a mockery of the four commandments regarding the relationship with God, they also resulted in abuses of relationship with one's fellow Jew.

This is what Jesus was railing against in the cleansing of the temple. He was acting against corrupt practices that dishonored both God and the people. He was acting against practices that detracted from the true purpose of the temple. He was acting against profane practices that literally stood in the way of religious practices.

Now we don't have the problems that Jesus found at the temple. We don't require moneychangers to convert your money to an acceptable form to pay your pledge. We don't have vendors selling sacrificial animals in the courtyard. Although sometimes we do have the Youth Group selling items to raise funds for their future mission trips. But that's hardly the same thing. Nonetheless, in this Lenten season we can take a lesson from Jesus' actions.

If there is an image that might help us in understanding the implications of our readings – particularly our Old Testament and Gospel, it is that of "crumbing a table." In some fancy restaurants, the waiter will methodically remove crumbs from the table between the main and dessert courses. The idea is that removing the crumbs that distract the diner, creating a clean surface, thereby creates and allows for a more pleasant dining experience. Specifically, that the neater the table, the more guests can focus on and enjoy what has been prepared for them.

That's kind of what Lent is about. Clearing away the unnecessary bits of our lives. The things that distract us from approaching and enjoying our goal. The joy of celebrating the Resurrection on Easter. The joy of embracing the life-giving gifts of forgiveness and salvation that are handed to us in that glorious act.

Just as Jesus clears away practices that obscure the real purposes of the temple, so do Lenten disciplines seek to identify and remove those things that distract us from our true and complete worship of God. And those things that distract us from true and authentic relationship with one another. Our response need not be quite as radical as that of Jesus. But here, as we near the halfway mark of our Lenten journey, our review and understanding of the Ten Commandments and Jesus' cleansing of the temple do invite us to take a critical look at our own relationship with God and with one another and determine how we might more fully enter into the spirit of this season of preparation.