

Sunday, March 7, 2021
Third Sunday in Lent (Year B)

John 2.13-22

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1087231881764107>

(Sermon begins at about 14:30)

“Removing Barriers and Being the Body of Christ”

Thus far this year, we have focused on the Gospel According to Mark. But through the rest of our Lenten journey, we switch to the Gospel According to John. Now to be sure, John’s Gospel is a completely different animal compared to the Synoptics Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John’s theological perspectives, his language, how he portrays Jesus, are all very different than the other three Gospels. And even some of the stories and when and how they are told are very different. Case in point: today’s telling of the cleansing of the Temple.

All four Gospels contain a version of Jesus cleansing the Temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place the event during Holy Week following Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, just days before his crucifixion. John, on the other hand, places this critical event at the opposite end. At the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. This alternative placement and other variations offer a different perspective on what Jesus’ actions in cleaning the Temple mean for us.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ first “sign”—as John refers to Jesus’ miracles—is the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Right after that, we find Jesus in Jerusalem for Passover. It is at this point that Jesus goes to the Temple and becomes outraged at the presence of money changers and vendors selling animals for Temple sacrifices. As we hear in today’s Gospel (and in all the Gospels), Jesus overturns the tables and drives the money changers and vendors out of the Temple.

Before we go any further, it’s worth pausing and looking at the whole system that developed around Temple sacrifices, and why Jesus found it problematic. Under Jewish Law, the way people received forgiveness of their sins was to offer sacrifices in the Temple. Sacrifices were offered for other reasons, as well, such as for thanksgiving, for healing, and to return one to ritual purity. Each category or purpose for sacrifice carried its own price: what type of animal was to be used. But not just any animal would do. Penitents couldn’t just bring in any old turtledove or sheep. There were very specific requirements, not the least of which was that the animals were to be free from any type of blemish. So, to insure that people were getting the appropriate animal in the proper condition for offering to God, not to mention the convenience of not having to locate and bring the required animal to the Temple, it was just easier all around to buy what was needed at the Temple. But, of course, blemish-free animals were more expensive. And the vendors tended to jack up the price because of the quality and for the convenience provided.

Then there were the money changers. You couldn’t just walk in off the street and buy an animal with whatever change you had in your pocket. The money used for everyday commerce was

the denarius: the coin of the Roman Empire, which occupied Israel at the time. Money that was considered profane because it contained images of the emperor. So, before one could purchase any animals from the Temple vendors, they had to convert denarii into shekels, the official money of the Temple. And just like when we convert money from dollars to pesos or euros, there is a price to be paid in the exchange rate.

You can see that this set of transactions was costly to potential worshipers and lucrative for both the vendors and the money changers. And while I don't know for sure, I would guess the Temple probably took their cut, as well. Because of all this—the price gouging and the profiteering—it is often assumed that Jesus is angry because of the corruption that had developed around the system of sacrifices. After all, we tend to recall more of the account in each of the Synoptics, where Jesus phrases his condemnation as: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers” (Mk 11.17). But John has Jesus telling those selling the animals, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” (Jn 2.16). Marketplace vs. den of robbers. A subtle but very real difference. In the Synoptic Gospels, in using the term “den of robbers,” Jesus is definitely railing against the corruption inherent in the system of vendors and money changers. In John, on the other hand, Jesus is angry that there is a marketplace in the Temple in the first place. As one commentator notes, “the temple had to include a marketplace (with vendors selling animals, currency exchanges, etc.) in order to make the longstanding sacrificial system run smoothly. And that's precisely the point: Jesus' anger seems to be focused not on corruption in general, but rather on the sacrificial system itself. His actions seem to say: *It is high time for that system to end, and for a new era to begin.*”¹ A distinction, an attitude, that comes through more clearly in John's telling than in the other three Gospels.

This is largely due to Jesus' choice of words. Jesus' words in John's Gospel would have called to mind the prophecies of Zechariah made prior to the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 BC—the Temple Jesus is now standing in. Zechariah prophesies that the Messiah will come and bring peace, with the acceptance and inclusion of all people: both Jews and Gentiles. When that happens, the Temple will become a place of worship for Jews and Gentiles alike. Zechariah concludes his prophecy with the words, “And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day” (Zech 14.21). Words that seem to imply an end to the sacrificial system. Or at least, in how it is implemented. In other words, Jesus driving the vendors out was in keeping with ancient prophecy about the coming of the Messiah and a complete change in the way the Temple operated.

While these subtleties are lost on us, they would not have been lost on the original witnesses to this event. Jesus is just starting his public ministry, and this is how he chooses to make his first public statement. A statement announcing his vision for ministry. Announcing what he is going to accomplish. And he does it by expelling the vendors and the money changers, the ones that supported the whole system of Temple sacrifice, in a way that would have recalled ancient prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. And he chose to do it when the Temple was at its busiest—right before the Passover.

The message behind Zechariah's prophecy—the message that Jesus is making in the cleansing of the Temple—was that the system of sacrifice created a layer of separation between God and

the people. That to be in relationship with God, one had to first go through the Temple and its complex system of sacrifices. The message that Jesus was sending was “No more! You no longer have to jump through hoops to get to God, to be in relationship with God. And its not just Jews. Anyone can have access to God. Let me show you the way.” That is what Jesus is conveying in his actions in the Temple.

Jesus even gives clues as to how that would happen. Two important clues. First was the fact that this unveiling of his mission was happening at the Feast of the Passover. It would be at another Feast of the Passover in several years, that his mission would be brought to fruition. And the second clue is in how that would be done. When the Temple leaders seek to understand by what authority Jesus is doing what he’s doing, he responds “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2.19). John’s Gospel provides the explanation that when Jesus was talking about “this temple” being destroyed, “he was speaking of the temple of his body” (Jn 2.21). That three days after the temple of his body was destroyed—after his crucifixion and death—he would be raised. Resurrected.

So here, right off the bat, Jesus is starting his public ministry with a bold, albeit a bit cryptic, statement of what his ministry was going to be about. That he was going to tear down barriers between God and God’s people. All God’s people, Jews and Gentiles alike. And that he would do that through his own death and Resurrection.

There is one other aspect of John’s account of the cleansing of the Temple that differs from the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels. Only in John’s account does Jesus make the statement equating his body with the temple: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

This has a more far-reaching significance than would appear at first glance. This simple statement and the imagery that is implied would come to inform the future understanding of just what church is. Of what it is that makes church, church. For that, we need to remember that the Gospel According to John was written sometime around 75 to 85 AD. After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 AD. The destruction of the Temple was a devastating loss for both Jews and the early Christians, who still had close ties with their Jewish heritage. Both religions would have struggled to make sense of the world, to find meaning in their beliefs, without the existence of their most sacred structure. Judaism adapted by reshaping worship practices to eliminate the system of sacrifices. Worship moved into homes and synagogues, with a necessary shift in focus. And early Christians, taking Jesus’ own words in today’s Gospel, reimagined the temple as his body. The Body of Christ becoming a common image used to describe the church. The Body of Christ being used to describe those who made up the church. The emphasis being not on physical buildings, but on the people comprising the church.

Today is the Third Sunday in Lent. It was the Third Sunday in Lent 2020 when we last had in-person worship in our church building. And over the last year, I have commented on the fact that just because we are not in our church building does not mean that the church is closed. That the church is not the building, the church is its members—the Body of Christ. Like the early church suddenly found without their Temple, we have struggled to figure out what that means for our communal life, for our ministries, for our worship. We have been creative. We have thought outside the box. And we have been successful and even thrived. Proving that when our

ability to operate from our church building was destroyed, we rose to the challenge, nonetheless. We relied on the image of the early church—that the church is the body of the faithful, not where they happened to meet for worship services.

While this has been difficult, I believe this time of pandemic has helped us get back in touch with the fundamental message Jesus was seeking to convey when he cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem. That sometimes our structures—be they physical or ideological—can create barriers to God. That the structures—physical or ideological—can become more important than relationship with God and with one another. Having temporarily removed some of those barriers, we have had the opportunity to find new and creative ways of focusing on what is truly important: how we work to be faithful to God and how we care for God’s people. In other words, how we faithfully and authentically embody what it means—what it truly means—to be the Body of Christ.

In due time, hopefully soon, we will rise again and return to this, our temple, restored, renewed, and raring to get on with what Christ has called us be: the Body of the Risen Christ.

¹ “Why is Jesus Angry? SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent 3,” SALT, March 2, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/27/why-is-jesus-angry-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3> (emphasis in original text).