

Sunday, March 3, 2024
Third Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Exodus 20.1-17; John 2.13-22

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/737589878499948>

(Sermon begins at about 23:40)

“Tearing Down Barriers”

Our readings for today, particularly our Old Testament reading from Exodus and our Gospel reading from John, present the full arc of our relationship with God, particularly as represented in and manifest through religious institutions. This arc does not just represent the history of where we have been in our lives of faith and how our faith has been formed and influenced—maybe even manipulated—by the religious institution writ large. These stories represent and—with a little digging—reveal the arc of our faith development past, present, and future.

For purposes of exploring this arc, we will use the Gospel as the present moment—the moment which our faith history has been building toward, and the moment which dictates where we go from here, individually and as the people of God. For it is what happens here in the Temple in Jerusalem in roughly the year 27 that forever changes how God relates to his people and to how we relate to our God.

The account in our Gospel reading is one of those well-known stories which is contained in all four Gospels. Although the version we heard this morning from the Gospel according to John differs in a couple of important details from the comparable accounts in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). First off is the timing. In the Synoptic Gospels the scene commonly referred to as Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple occurs at the end of his life during what we know as Holy Week. In fact, in all the Synoptics the first thing Jesus does after his triumphal entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is to go to the Temple and turn things upside down, literally. In the Synoptics, it is Jesus cleansing the Temple that solidifies the authorities’ desire to get rid of Jesus. Setting in motion the events of Jesus’ Passion.

Yet, in John’s Gospel, this scene at the Temple occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. While the Synoptics all have Jesus beginning his public ministry with accounts of preaching and healing, John uses the event of the cleansing the Temple as the first true act of his public ministry. This bold act occurring at the most sacred of places during the most holy of celebration in all Judaism—the Temple at Passover. In so doing, Jesus is making an incredibly bold statement about who he is and what his ministry will be about. This is portrayed in a couple of ways.

First is the act of cleansing the Temple itself. As we are told, he drove out the money changers and vendors selling animals for ritual sacrifice. Functions that were viewed as critical to Temple worship in general, but particularly for High Holy Days such as Passover. People would come from all over the known world on such High Holy Days to offer sacrifices—an action central to Jewish Temple worship. Under Jewish law the animals to be sacrificed had to meet particular

standards—namely that they were to be unblemished. This all necessitated a system of commerce entailing people changing money used elsewhere in the Empire to the shekel used in the Temple and then purchasing the animals from the vendors. All of which was a financial hardship for poorer worshippers. The Synoptics portray Jesus as being angry and cleansing the Temple because of this abusive system of transactions, referring to the money changers and vendors as having made the Temple a “den of robbers.”

But here, in John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” In using this term, acknowledging the necessity of these money changers and vendors to the Temple’s system of sacrifice. So here, he does not seem so much to be angry at the business practices per se, as he is angry at the sacrificial system itself. The implication being that the system of sacrifices had become an impediment, a barrier, between God and the people, as opposed to a means of deepening relationship with God. You couldn’t just go in and worship God freely. You had to go through a whole set of financial transactions that met certain requirements before you could even think about worshiping God. In effect, Jesus, in cleansing the Temple, is making a commentary on how the Temple had impeded, rather than facilitated relationship between God and his people. Completely counter to the original intent of how the people were meant to relate to God.

To understand this original vision for relationship with God, we need to step back and look at our Old Testament reading: God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. To put this in context, this occurred during the time the Hebrews were in the wilderness, following their liberation from slavery in Egypt, as they traveled to the Promised Land. During their time in Egypt, the people had drifted away from God. After leaving Egypt, one of the primary orders of business was to reestablish the relationship between God and his people. The Ten Commandments provided the framework for doing just that. Rather than being an arbitrary set of prohibitions, the Ten Commandments and all the commandments God gave the people were meant to provide limits to guide the people into living with justice, grace, and dignity. They were meant to provide a way of relating to God in everyday life. To provide a foundation for and understanding of what was expected in relationship with God. And throughout the time in the wilderness, the tablets of the Ten Commandments, carried in the Ark of the Covenant, were the visible symbol of God’s day-to-day presence among his people.

Upon their return to Israel, the people settled in the land. Over a period of nearly four centuries, they developed as a people and as a culture. Their relationship with God continued to develop. In the fullness of time, the Temple was constructed in Jerusalem as a permanent home for God. As a place where the people could go and worship God. A system of worship that developed out of the Laws that God had given to the people during their time in the wilderness.

What started out in the wilderness as a means for the people to experience relationship with God who was present among them slowly transformed into an ossified system of rites and rituals centered around the Temple. God had gone from moving around in the midst of the people, to being hidden away in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Temple. The primary means of interaction between the people and their God being through a system of

sacrifices, which had been part of relationship with God for the last four hundred plus years. Only now those sacrifices being performed only in the Temple.

Over the centuries between the establishment of the Temple and the time of Jesus, that system of sacrifices, while central to Jewish worship, had become more entrenched, more rigid, more manipulated by the Temple authorities. As a result, the system meant to be a means to deeper relationship with God had become for many an impediment. A barrier that served to separate people from, rather than to bring them closer to, their God.

This is what Jesus was railing against in the Temple on that Passover. Overturning the tables of the money changers and the vendors was not just an expression of his anger at the barriers that had been erected between God and his people. This act was a symbolic dismantling of those barriers. Overturning the tables of the money changers and the vendors being a symbolic overturning of the entire religious system. Which would indeed happen in multiple ways. Although, no one could have foretold that in another 40 or so years, the Temple would be destroyed by the Romans, ending the abusive sacrificial system. But in the meantime, Jesus himself, even as he was symbolically disrupting that system, was keenly aware of another sacrifice that would take the place of animal sacrifice. His own sacrifice.

The Temple authorities ask Jesus, “What sign can you show for doing this?” Really meaning, “by what authority—by whose authority—are you doing this?” To which Jesus responds, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The authorities naturally thinking Jesus was talking about the destruction of the building in which they were standing. Although, as John then tells us, “But he was speaking of the temple of his body.” Jesus signaling a new age, with a new way of relating to God. With the temple at the center of that relationship no longer being one of stone but being in the person of Jesus. Here, at the beginning of his public ministry (as portrayed by John), Jesus sees the endgame. Before he barely even begins his public ministry, he is, albeit in a cryptic way, foretelling the end of that ministry: his death and resurrection. The actions which move us from the present to the future.

As those who live this side of the resurrection, we are living into the future that Jesus envisioned for our relationship with God. We are living into the future that Jesus embodied through his death and resurrection. A future in which there are no longer barriers between us and God. Which, in a way, is going back to the original intent of our past. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, he was providing a framework, a foundation, for the people to be in relationship with God as he moved among them in their wilderness journey. But loving organization and structures, we created more systems to guide—and to seek to control—relationship with God. To the point that those structures and systems became barriers between the people and their God.

To rectify the situation, to tear down the barriers that had been erected over time, God came in the flesh to live among us in the person of Jesus. Through his life and ministry, through his death and resurrection, he has shown us a new way. The way that, through him, provides direct relationship with our God.

Despite knowing we are in direct relationship with God, we do, at times, get distracted from that truth, wrapped up on our day-to-day lives. Because of everything that goes on in our lives and in the world around us, we sometimes allow barriers to slowly be erected between us and God. Our annual journey through Lent is a time in which we intentionally shift our focus back to that most central of relationships. A time when we follow Jesus' example and turn things upside down in our spiritual lives, tearing down those barriers that might separate us from God, allowing for the renewed and deepened relationship we will celebrate at Easter.