



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, March 4, 2018

The Third Sunday in Lent

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Exodus 20:1-17 | Psalm 19 | 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 | John 2:13-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

I don't know about you, but the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple is a scary story to me. Do you know how you would have reacted if you had been there? If I'd been there as a disciple, I'd have buried my face in my hands and peeked through my fingers at what surely was a disaster unfolding before me; I'd have flinched as Jesus gave back-talk when the priests questioned him. He's going to get in big trouble! I'd think. He's going to get us all in big trouble! Why can't he just be nice and get along? Why stir up trouble? If I'd been in the crowd as an inquirer, I'd have been put off. Huh, I'd think. He can't be the Messiah if he's going berserk tearing the Temple apart. You lost me with the whip, buddy. If I'd been with the authorities, I might have dismissed him as a fool, especially when he got evasive and enigmatic when asked for a sign: Just who do you think you are? I would ask with them. If you can't or won't explain yourself or show your authority to do these things, I'll oppose you in the name of the Law and all it means to us. If I were in the core group of disciples, I'd be asking: How did we get here?

How did we get here, actually? What made Jesus erupt in this bold direct action? For this is clearly not a planned strategic attack: it has all the marks of an impulsive act in response to deeply upsetting circumstances. What were those circumstances? Jesus identifies commerce in the Temple as the problem: "Don't make my Father's house a house of trade!" The Temple was built to be the center of the Jewish life of covenant with God: a place of beauty and serenity that drew people closer to God in worship and obedience to the Law. It was a sacred space where the appointed sacrifices were offered and prayers made, where people gathered to celebrate the gifts God had given throughout the history of Israel. The Temple was meant to ring with the praises of God, not the clamor of haggling over prices or the clink of coins changing hands.

And yet the stalls of cows and sheep and birds for sale and the tables for currency exchanges had developed out of perceived necessity: pilgrims to Jerusalem from other parts of Israel and indeed the world could not bring their sacrificial

animals all that way with them. And even if they could have brought the goods for sacrifice, they would still need to change their own money into the currency that was acceptable at the Temple for tithes and offerings. The animal sellers and the money changers were meeting real needs of people coming to the Temple: where better to house such accommodations than on the Temple grounds, in one of the outer courts? It all seems so reasonable. And yet, the more the accommodations developed, the farther they took the Temple from being centered on God alone, the less the Temple was a place to encounter the living God who had made covenant and given the Law to God's people.

For the Law was not given merely to be restrictive and limiting. The psalm tells us that the Law of the Lord is perfect, that it revives the soul, makes the simple wise, that it rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes. The Law is given to define what it means to love God and to provide clarity about how to love our neighbor. And the Ten Commandments are nothing if not clear; blunt, indeed, calling a spade a spade. It's not so much all those "thou shalt not's" that put us off; it's the uncompromising words that follow. When I sigh over a real estate ad, or ask "how come she makes that much?" that's not really coveting, is it? Or the pen taken home from the office—that doesn't count as theft, does it? Adultery is such a sordid word. Misusing the Lord's name is so common that it has its own abbreviation, OMG. The white lies someone tells for her boss are not seen as a major problem, not like real lying. So rather than reading the commandments regularly and letting them enlighten our eyes and correct our behavior, we dodge the commandments with euphemisms and excuses.

This is an accommodation to our intentions: none of us sets out in the morning consciously intending to violate the basic values expressed in the Ten Commandments. How much lying can I fit in today? We all hold them in high esteem; we just find that it's very hard to keep them, in every way in every aspect of our lives. So we fudge and fiddle and convince ourselves that, really, we're not so bad: what we do isn't such a big deal, that our little vagaries don't amount to breaking the Ten Commandments. So we can keep our sense that we honor the Word and our God without upsetting our self-esteem or rocking the calm of our usual habits.

And I haven't even mentioned yet the first four commandments, those that are about how we relate to God. There our blindness is even greater, for averting our eyes from the ways we violate what God intends for our human relationships makes us blind to the call of the commandments about how we interact with God. If we won't admit that we're stealing that pen, we'll never acknowledge our obeisance to the idols that surround us. We'll never see our own complicity in the systems that defraud our brothers and sisters in wage theft, or know how our peace might depend upon state-sanctioned violence. We won't be able to trace our self-promotion and self-protection back to our failure to acknowledge that only God is God and to have no other gods before him. We'll have built structures that accommodate our sins, not to help us turn from them but to keep us from seeing them from what they are.

It is those structures that make Jesus come crashing down to flip our tables and pour on the ground those coins we've been gathering so carefully. That's the deep reason that this story is so scary: Jesus comes to clean up our own sordid Temples. Jesus flails his whip to drive away our excuses and euphemisms to free us for the love of God. Jesus, embodying the love of God, wants us to worship so fully that the love of God flows through our lives. Jesus came bringing the Kingdom of God; in the fullness of his life, death, and resurrection he intends the Kingdom to be so vibrant among us that the work of the Temple becomes, strictly speaking, immaterial.

But the work of the Kingdom is not immaterial: it is materialized in Jesus' body: in his crucified body, in his resurrected body, and his Body the Church. We bring to Jesus' crucified body all those ways, small and large, in which we have failed to live the life God intends us to live. We rejoice and are renewed in his resurrection that brings us from death to life. We live out his passion for the world by being his hands and feet, being part of the Body of Christ, doing what he does and answering his rousing call. We follow Christ, even when it means swooping in to drive away the excuses and euphemisms from our own hearts, and the money changers and the animal sellers from the temples of our society. We follow Christ in examining our own hearts and lives to walk more closely in Christ's ways; we follow Christ in working to undo the savage inequalities that distort the lives of God's children; we follow Christ in joining those who "call BS" and seek to remove idols from our society.

Beloved, our call is to love God and let the chips fall where they may.

Amen.