

### LENT 3 B

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

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, this third Sunday in Lent!

Jesus isn't the only one.

I bet each and every one of us here has wanted to clear the decks at some point and shout, *Enough!* Your kitchen junk drawer...the garage...your teenager's room.

Tossing out the useless stuff, sorting out the needed stuff, retuning the misplaced items to their correct home...what a feeling of accomplishment!

But maybe the solution isn't always so simple, the mess in front of us involving people along with the things.

Maybe it's your carpool partner late again.

Maybe it's your child whining from the back seat every two minutes, *Are we there yet?*

Maybe it's the sing song voice of customer service saying, *"All our representatives are busy...please hold and your call will be answered in the order in which it was received."*

Whether we are frustrated with computer gremlins or the Registry of Motor Vehicles or the IRS, that sense of being ignored - of participating in a system run amok - is enough to drive any one of us to sweeping gestures and loud declarations.

It just seems so uncharacteristic of Jesus, though. Oh sure, he described Peter as Satan on occasion – just in last week's gospel reading, as a matter of fact – and has been known to describe the authorities as a brood of vipers.

But to knock over tables and scold ordinary merchants and chase away animals with a whip and a loud voice - in the temple no less - seems pretty odd for the Prince of Peace.

It is even more unsettling, however, when we realized that at the root of Jesus' anger was the corruption of worship and the degradation of God's house by folks who likely thought they were doing it right, crossing all the t's and dotting all the i's in a time-honored system - folks not too different from us.

Proper worship in that day and time involved animal sacrifice, and according to scripture the animals, like the participants themselves, had to be pure, and "unblemished". People traveling from all over the countryside to Jerusalem for the high feast of Passover would most likely

purchase an animal rather than try to travel a great distance and keep one clean and unscathed throughout the journey. Those dove sellers and sheep merchants were performing a necessary service - at least one necessary according to the powers that be and the traditions that held.

Worship also involved a temple tax, a contribution that needed to be paid in the undecorated coin called a shekel, the only one appropriate for a people that was commanded to avoid graven images of other gods. Roman coins honoring Caesar and imprinted with his face were forbidden and needed to be exchanged for the temple coins - hence the money changers, a kind of first century ATM, another needed service for travelers.

And moving all these activities right into the court of the gentiles, just outside the worship space was a matter of convenience, for the worshipers arriving yes, but especially for the merchants doing business.

Some have suggested that the money changers and animal sellers were cheating the people, and perhaps they were. If you've ever gone to the Boston Garden or Gillette Stadium, you know how high prices can get inside an arena with a monopoly, where bottled water can reach the \$5 mark.

Some have suggested that people were prevented from using their own animals, that the temple inspectors got a kick back from the vendors to turn away home grown animals so the travelers would buy the "official" version - also likely to be true. Limiting the competition is no less prevalent today, when "security" prevents home brought refreshments in theaters and on planes and trains.

Some have suggested that the vendors crowded the only space available for the gentiles, the non-members, keeping ordinary people out of God's house, and that loud conversations and business deals were distracting for those inside the walls. This is a real possibility if you think about the volume of bartering voices, and the bleating and mooing and cooing of the animals - a noise level that certainly trumps any coughing or crying or cell phone ringing we might experience in a modern gathering.

But at its core - at the heart of the matter - is the fact that all those traditions, all those rules, all those conveniences of unblemished animals and appropriate coins had drawn the worshipers' attention away from the One who was to be worshiped. All of the clutter and all of the conversation had blinded the temple authorities and the people to the presence of God in the temple - God's presence in the holy of holies *and* in the person of Jesus who stood among them as God's beloved.

Worship had become a business, a supply and demand exercise, and the temple had become a marketplace. No wonder Jesus is upset!

And the chilling truth is that such misplaced attention is not just a first century phenomenon.

When does convenience become more important than contrition?

When does purity become more important than praise?

When does preparing the building become the defining moment and the discipleship that begins there gets lost in the crowd?

And sometimes we too become cluttered, our heads and hearts filled with the noise and challenges and distractions of our busy lives, drowning out the call to put God first and our neighbor equal to ourselves.

The church, of course, is not God's only dwelling, and it isn't really a dwelling at all. As we often faithfully say it is the body of Christ. Like our forebears in the first century who struggled to understand Jesus and his propensity to move in unexpected and unseemly places, with unusual and unapproved people, and finally end up like a criminal on a cross, we are expected to take all of God's words and move out of the doors and halls and traditional formats, to live that word among the people - God's people - wherever we go and wherever they might be - and however unpopular it might make us.

"Lent" comes from an old English word meaning spring, and spring is always a good time to swing open the doors and drawers and closets and clean out the dust and stale air of the winter. We do this not because the calendar says the vernal equinox is approaching but because it is needed. And that is true for spring cleaning our faith life as well. Lent is a good time to examine our patterns and plans, a time too when change is in the air. It is a time to rediscover the *why* of what we do, the *who* of whose we are.

It is a good time to reread those words God gave to the people through Moses, words we heard today in our first reading, words we dutifully numbered and eventually called the ten commandments. They are words that call us to remember to love God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves, words that include ways to do just that, with honesty and honor, patience and forgiveness, generosity and humility.

There will be plenty of gems unearthed in that process of spiritual spring cleaning, faith practices that sustain and support us. There may be plenty of aha! discoveries, too, hidden in the dust, that move us forward and need just a bit of polish and updating. And some that no longer serve the life God calls us to live or the neighbors we are called to care for.

Still, when we return intentionally to the core - to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - the command to love God and to love others becomes more than a list of *shall nots* and discipleship moves beyond repetitive practice and *should haves*. We are invited to live a life of *shall's* and *let's* as we center our communal life on God's vision for the world and its people.

It is the zeal for God's house, the holy anger at the corruptions and misinterpretations that creep into our human organizations and habits, that keep us coming to the temple and to the table. It is the call of the church reformed and ever being reformed that keeps us sitting together, praying together, listening together, and being church together, even as we walk the path of discipleship in our daily life, where we live and work and play and study.

There will surely be times we stumble, times we get caught up in the details, missing the forest for the trees. But if we continue to hold fast to that zeal - that spirit -if we continue to center our commitment around the always steadfast Christ, we will say, *Enough!* when enough needs to be said. We will change when change needs to happen. We will act when faced with God's people and God's world in need.

And our efforts and our actions will be enough, because they will come through us from the just and loving and merciful God who comes into our lives and our world and is more than enough -- is in fact the only One that we need, the One and only One who can and does fill our hearts and our lives with love and justice and peace. Amen.

*Rev. Carolyn Tryggestad*

*Emmanuel Lutheran Church*

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