

Spring Cleaning

A Sermon Preached by the
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March 15, 2009
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Exodus 20:1-17

John 2:13-22

If you thought Jesus had forgotten his manners last week, or, as Dries said, apparently never heard of Minnesota Nice, hang on to the pew, because you ain't seen nothin' yet! This is Lent, and in Lent we get the stories of the "other Jesus," the one who is rude to his friends, calling them Satan, the Jesus that said that if people want to follow him, they must give up everything, including their families and their job security; the one who said he came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, that he didn't come to bring peace, but a sword. This is the "other" Jesus who, in this morning's lesson, storms into the temple and absolutely wrecks the place, knocking over tables, driving livestock out with a whip, and generally disrupting worship on Passover, one of the holiest of the high holy days.

This "other" Jesus is not the Jesus who "wants me for a sunbeam." He is not, as someone said, the "potluck Jesus," the Jesus who joins me in my pew singing praise songs louder than the band; not the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." This is the Jesus who comes to our church and asks why we have cushioned pews instead of mattresses for the homeless. This is the Jesus who interrupts worship and says, "Why are you singing happy songs in here when children in this very neighborhood went to bed hungry and abused last night?" This is the Jesus that we try to explain away by saying that things were different back then, that he wouldn't do that today; so it's easy to distance ourselves from this

cleansing-the-temple event – after all, there are no sheep and cows in the narthex, and we’re not exchanging dollars for dimes or collecting exorbitant fees for sacrificial animals. This is the Jesus who is difficult to preach about, because he isn’t convicting us with love and kindness and compassion; but is, instead, making us very uncomfortable. But this is Lent, and comfort is not a priority in Lent.

I agree with the person who suggested that, “the reality is (that) this Jesus cannot be explained. He must not be explained. (So) We are left with three choices: run away from him; stand with open mouths embarrassed by him; or run out and bring in the crippled, unclean and forgotten to fill the gap that is left when Jesus is done with the selfish, complacent, and unjust.” That person goes on to say, “Let’s quit explaining this other Jesus. Let’s quit acting like embarrassed relatives of a madman. Let’s start really asking, ‘What would happen if this other Jesus came to cleanse (our) sanctuary? What would happen if this other Jesus came into the temple of (our) hearts?’”¹ This is Lent and this is when we are faced with those kinds of questions in all of their sobering reality.

This story of turning over the tables in the temple is told in all four Gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it comes at the end of Jesus’ ministry, during the last week of his life, after his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. In each of those accounts, it’s preceded by the account of the rich young man asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. And in every one, Jesus tells him the same thing, “keep the commandments.” And you know what they are: do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not bear false witness against another, honor your father and your mother.

In the Gospel of John, this event occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when the disciples are just getting to know him. Can you imagine what they thought? Don’t you think they

¹ Jerry Goebel, onefamilyoutreach.com, March 19, 2006.

wondered what on earth they had gotten themselves into? One preacher said, “No doubt the disciples tossed and turned a long, sleepless night that evening; it must have been terribly disconcerting to witness Jesus unhinged, throwing furniture, screaming at the top of his lungs, and flinging money into the air. Perhaps they ran for cover with the crowd. I would have. Did they look him in the eyes the next morning, or shuffle their feet, stare at the ground and make small talk?”²

Of course, we know what set him off. Or we think we do. Bottom line is that the temple had been turned into one giant department store, all in the name of being faithful. The whole system of commerce in the temple was well established, and Jesus would have known that. Jewish law required that every adult male over the age of twenty, regardless of their economic status, pay an annual temple tax of a half-shekel, which for some represented about two days’ wages. The temple tax was used for the general support of the temple – kind of like our pledges and the operating budget, or our per capita payment to presbytery. It’s been estimated that in today’s economy, a day at the temple could end up costing a person upwards of \$1,000.

The payment of the temple tax was complicated by the fact that it could only be paid with Jewish currency, or the “sanctuary shekel,” so those making the Passover pilgrimage from foreign lands, couldn’t pay with foreign currency, and would have to exchange it. The moneychangers had the advantage of knowing the exchange rates of different currencies, so it was pretty easy for them to take advantage of the pilgrims by charging more and adding extra fees.

Additionally, any animal offered for sacrifice at Passover had to be “without spot or blemish,” according to the instructions in the book of Numbers. Anyone bringing their own animals had to have them inspected by the temple priests, and, not surprisingly, those animals were almost always rejected, which meant that the person

² Daniel B. Clendenin, www.journeywithjesus.net, copyright 2001-2009.

had to buy another from the priests or the merchants in the courtyard, since they were the only ones who offered perfect animals for sacrifice. And, of course, the prices were inflated for profit. So once again, those travelers to Jerusalem for the high holy days ended up with the short end of the stick. And it was all done in the name of convenience. Let's make it easy for them, so they don't have the hardship of bringing their animals such a long distance. No shekels? I can help you with that. They were services that were meant for the convenience of people who had to travel long distances to get to Jerusalem, services that had become badly mismanaged. One historian estimated that as many as two million pilgrims might be in Jerusalem for the annual Passover season, so you can imagine that business in the temple was very good during the holidays.

It's not clear whether Jesus was against all commercial activity in the temple on principle, even the honest transactions that were necessary for pilgrims to fulfill their religious obligations; or that he was he just angry with those who had control of the means of ritual purity through animal sacrifice and the temple tax, and thus had control to the access to God. Either way, on this day, everybody took it on the chin. Everybody felt the wrath of his whip and the heat of his anger at the blatant disregard of the commandments, the outright disrespect for the house of God.

During Lent, this Gospel lesson is often paired with the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments, and it's not much of a stretch to see the connection. The first, and most important commandment, is "you shall have no other gods before me," followed by "you shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

Like Israel, we are very good at finding things to take the place of God in our lives. And, if we're not careful, they can become idolatrous. The whole temple system, with its buying and selling for atonement, had essentially bypassed God, simply moved

God out of the way. Their relationship with God had become less important than the ways in which they thought they honored God with ritual sacrifice and worship. They forgot that before Solomon, there was no temple. The temple was embodied in Israel, the people of God, and God moved with them. Only when the temple was built did they think that God could be kept in one place and they would have to come to God. Only when the temple was built did the priesthood become such a corrupt bureaucracy and the temple a place to do business.

I'm always struck by those news reports of churches being wiped out by tornadoes or burned to the ground by an arsonist, and the pastor or church member is interviewed and always says that the building isn't the church. The church is the people and the people are still there and will continue in the ministry that they believe God has called them to do. But almost in the next breath, they always vow to rebuild. You never hear about a displaced congregation that abandons the building and takes their ministry to the streets, where the least of God's children live in cardboard boxes or corrugated tin shacks with no running water or sanitation. You never hear about a displaced congregation that decides that they didn't need the building anyway; that following Jesus means taking the Gospel to the ones left behind; that following Jesus means making sure children are fed, the elderly are sheltered and not neglected or abused, the sick have adequate health care and the means with which to pay for it, and everyone gets their fair share of the world's resources.

This is one of those Sundays when I'd like to be visiting churches and listening to what other pastors are saying about the scriptures for today in light of the current global economic crisis. "You shall have no other gods before me." Not your career, your investments, or your houses, cars, airplanes, yachts, vacation villas – not to mention all the other stuff you've accumulated. "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." Preying upon the weakest to gratify our need for power, pleasure or popularity is the real definition of using God's name in vain.

Think of the enormous injustice done in the name of religion throughout the centuries.

“You shall not steal; you shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.” And I can’t say anything more about that than what you read in the newspapers or hear on the news every single day.

Preaching on this text and the financial crises we’re all facing, one pastor said, “First and foremost, this crisis has brought us to a renewed realization that . . . we are all in this together. We have come to realize that the judgment of a loan officer to relax the rules and give a mortgage to someone who really can’t afford it doesn’t just affect the bank giving the loan and the person taking out the loan, but if repeated enough times, it begins to affect all of us. We have come to know that when Wall Street bankers are allowed to stretch the rules and to ‘leverage their earnings’ while regulators look the other way, it doesn’t just affect the Wall Street types. It affects all of us. Foreclosures, bankruptcies, factory closing, unemployment are all stinging reminders that our way of life was unsustainable and that we needed a good comeuppance. We don’t even need to wait for the third and fourth generation for the visitation of iniquities. They are bearing down on us like a freight train. . . (The problem is that) We don’t want to make hard choices, we want it all – except responsibility.”³

We tend to think of biblical law, including the Ten Commandments, in negative terms, rather than understanding it as a gracious gift from God for the sake of the life, health, and well being of individuals in community. If, in fact, we are all in this together – and I firmly believe that we are – then we all need to take the initiative and assume responsibility for the world that we’re a part of. God is not the kind of God who has chosen to do it all alone.

Lent is a time to take responsibility and ask the hard questions. What tables would Jesus turn over today? In our church,

³ Dr. Peter Samuelson, “Reflections from the Woodshed,” 3rd Sunday in Lent 2009, www.day1.org

in our denomination, in our personal spiritual lives? One commentator writes, “I read the cleansing of the temple as a stark warning against any and every false sense of security. Misplaced allegiances, religious presumption, pathetic excuses, smug self-satisfaction, spiritual complacency, nationalist zeal, political idolatry, and economic greed in the name of God are only some of the tables that Jesus would overturn in his own day and in ours. Church is more than a place to enjoy a night of bingo or to reinforce (our) many prejudices and illusions.” What’s on your list of tables that need to be overturned?

Thankfully, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for all of creation. And God’s house is a place of refuge, a sanctuary for those who are wounded or abused; it is where justice and mercy abide, where compassion and love and courage hold hands with brokenness and grief and despair. We are God’s house, all of us, not this building, not the wonderful programs we provide, or even the worship that brings us together. We are God’s house, we are the place of refuge and sanctuary, and it’s never too soon to start spring cleaning. Amen.