

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
3rd Sunday of Lent, Year B
March 4, 2018
text: John 2:13-22
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca

He was so zealous for the things of God, that Jesus couldn't contain his anger over how far off base the people had strayed. This morning's Gospel does not portray the sweet Jesus we can keep contained in a little box to take out on Sundays, and then put back on the shelf for another week. No, Jesus can be fierce.

The passage about how Jesus 'cleansed' the temple by making a whip of cords and turning the tables of the money changers is found in all four gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, that is, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this story is placed just before Jesus' arrest and trial, making it the virtual last straw that angered the authorities. In John's Gospel, this story is placed at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry where it points to Jesus as a reformer of the faith.

When I hear this story, I feel bad for the poor money changers. After all, they were just doing their job-providing a service to the pilgrims seeking to worship on the temple grounds. Many would have come from far away, especially for Passover, and they would have needed to purchase clean, unblemished animals for the ritual sacrifice. They would need to pay for them using the correct currency. You see, the denarii and drachmas and other coins of the time had either pagan symbols or imperial portraits engraved on them, and so could not be used inside the temple grounds.

But Jesus turned over their tables and shouted, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market place!" Instead of a place of prayer, set apart for time with God, Jesus saw that the ritual sacrifice and all of its procedures and business had become the main focus, not just for the money changers, but for priest and pilgrim alike.

It might be easier to handle this wild, prophetic Jesus when he is safely consigned to history or when we see him dishing it out to other people, but can we imagine what if someone came into Zion and acted in this way? Would we accept such behavior? No, we would call the police immediately. But Jesus' words are for our instruction as well as for those folks way back there in the first century. And so we should be asking ourselves, Where is our focus when we think about the church? Is church somewhere we receive the goods and services we expect? Or is it a place from which we are sent? How does the business or the busy-ness of church help or hinder our relationship with God in Christ? And for that matter, what is the church and what is it for?

When Jesus initially spoke with the astonished witnesses to his actions in the temple, he referred to his Father's house, that is the place of prayer, where he had studied and discussed Scripture with the elders when he just a boy, the place he came with pilgrim groups from Nazareth. The temple was the center of the Jewish world because it contained the holy of holies, the real presence of God.

Being Jewish, Jesus knew that animal sacrifice was taught as the way to offer something to God, to show one's love and obedience, and to atone for sins to get right with God. But Jesus turns the tables on the system, clearing out this old way of relating to God. He was frustrated with the temple, because he saw that by placing so much focus on such practices, people were missing out on God.

As early as the prophet Hosea the voice of God had proclaimed, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings." But Jesus is going even further here.

When asked what sign he could give them, to justify his appalling actions, Jesus said, tear THIS temple down and in three days I will rebuild it. This doesn't exactly clear things up. The people have no clue what he is talking about. At least at not until after the resurrection, when they figure out that he was talking about his own body being the temple. If he had said this more clearly, Jesus would have been immediately arrested for blasphemy. His body? The sacred place of God's presence? Jesus was here declaring that God was fully present to him, in his own body; the divine presence was within him.

The passage reminds me of the description of God by author Annie Dillard. "On the whole," she wrote, "I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

I'm reminded of this because on the night before he died, Jesus took bread and told his disciples to take, eat, this is my body. At our baptisms, we become part and parcel of the Body of Christ. Each week we are nourished with his own body and blood, we take in what we become. As the body of Christ, we too, become the temple of God's spirit. In his first letter to the people in Corinth, the apostle Paul says, Don't you know? Hasn't anyone ever told you? You yourselves are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you.

As important as our practices and traditions and the business and busy-ness of Zion may be, they are not the main thing we are to be about. The season of Lent calls us to get back to the heart of the matter, to put our focus on God, who is among us and within us. And so we gather as the Body of Christ, to worship God in community and to listen for God's Spirit to inspire us before sending us out in Christ's name.