

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 15, 2009
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19:7-14
Romans 7:13-25
John 2:13-22

The story in our Gospel lesson today is a good example of how the different Gospel writers use the events of Jesus' life for their own purposes and audiences.

All four Gospels tell this story of Jesus in the Temple, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it near the very *end* of Jesus' ministry. In fact, for them it is this angry demonstration by Jesus in the temple which becomes the deciding factor in the decision by the authorities to kill Jesus.

John also links this story to Jesus' death, locating it within the context of Passover (cf. v. 13; cf. also John 19:31-37). But John places the story at the very *beginning* of Jesus' ministry, here in chapter two.

What is John trying to say by placing this story here at the beginning of things rather than at the end of things?

The context may help us here. A very important event happens here in John chapter 2 -- do you remember what it is? It is the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where Jesus turns the water into wine.

Do you remember how the story plays out? There were six large stone jars filled with water, and when the wine ran out Jesus instructed the steward to fill the

stone jars with water and to taste it. When he did so, he discovered it had become wine!

But the small detail we must not miss is that those stone jars were used for the rites of purification.

By the time of Jesus, an elaborate system of purification had developed where some things were considered pure and others impure.

Women were impure seven days after the birth of a son, and 14 days after the birth of a daughter. People with blemishes or skin diseases (such as we've read about in Mark's Gospel) were impure and were isolated from others. Many foods were considered impure. Most things sexual were impure. And dead bodies were a real "no no."

What you had then was an elaborate system that had arisen which drew sharp social boundaries between people. Clear lines of demarcation were drawn between Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, pure and impure, righteous and sinners.

And guess what became the heart and soul of this "purity system?" The temple. The house of God. The sacred place of prayer and worship.

Jewish people were required to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to offer sacrifices in the temple. And if you had to travel large distances, it would be

impractical and cost prohibitive to bring animals with you. So there were businessmen who would sell you your sacrificial animals once you arrived.

These animals had to be perfect, but that meant that they were also expensive. Many poor people could not afford them. Further, it would be idolatrous to purchase these animals with Roman coins, because the emperor's image was stamped on them. So there were money changers (Eugene Peterson calls them "loan sharks") who offered to "exchange" your currency for Jewish currency -- for a price, of course.

The result was that many social boundaries continued to be sharply drawn through this purity system, and the locus of much of this activity was the Temple.

And when Jesus turns the water into wine, it's not for the purpose of "keeping the party going." John seems to tell us that Jesus is challenging the entire "purity system" that has grown up which keeps some out while allowing others in. Jesus is challenging the whole system of rules that names some people and things impure and others pure.

But there is something else going on here when John places this story of the Temple cleansing at the beginning of things rather than the end of things.

The story begins by telling us that it is time for the Passover celebration. This is John's way of preparing us for what comes later in the Gospel, namely, that Jesus is the "Paschal Lamb" who is slain for our deliverance and forgiveness.

To do this, John shows us specific examples in the Gospel where Jesus supercedes something held very dear in the hearts and minds of the people. In chapter 6, for example, Jesus becomes the “bread of life” who supercedes the manna given to the people during their wilderness wanderings.

In chapter 4, while speaking to the woman at the well, Jesus says that he is “living water” that could satisfy her deepest thirst, superceding the water from Jacob’s well that was thought to have special qualities.

And in our text today, Jesus goes after perhaps the most iconic, majestic, and deeply held symbol of God’s presence and power -- the Temple. This magnificent structure that took almost 50 years to build was seen as the undisputed location of God’s presence in the world.

And as Jesus enters it, he finds that the place that was designed to be a place of prayer, a place where God’s people were to come in faith and humility to worship and to bring sacrifices, a place where God’s people were to be together in true community, has instead become a place of oppression, a large-scale commercial operation. The Father’s house, the house of prayer, has become (in the words of Eugene Peterson) a “shopping mall.”

Jesus is angry, of course, and I suspect he *has been* and *remains so* in every instance throughout history where the institutional church has lost its way. Jesus’ purging of the Temple here is a clarion call to the established church of the day to

return to its original calling -- namely, Exodus 20 and the Decalogue. For what Jesus discovered on this day in the temple was a gross corruption of what God had in mind for the people of Israel when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

God rescued the people from slavery and then gave them the commandments so that they could be his redeemed people, so that they could live in a loving relationship with their Creator and with one another in true communal life. Relationships were to be loving, just, and compassionate. God was to have priority in all things.

In this act of disruptive compassion, then, Jesus challenges the church of his day to return to the first commandment. To put God first, to cast away its idols of greed, money, and status. To live in community where rules are understood within the context of compassionate relationships.

But Jesus is doing something else here also. He is showing that this magnificent structure, the center of God's presence, is about to be eclipsed. As the true Paschal Lamb, Jesus is about to be offered up. He is about to be "consumed" with zeal for his Father's house. And in so doing, Jesus now becomes the focal point of God's presence. True worship will now be centered around a *Person* more than a *place*.

What Jesus does is, of course, disruptive and challenging. It is costly to the merchants and moneychangers, to those who were heavily invested in the *status quo*, and also to Jesus himself.

And in challenging them, Jesus challenges us as well. This Lenten season affords us the opportunity to examine our own hearts, to ask ourselves whether God is truly first in our lives. To ask ourselves whether *relationships* are as important as *rules* when it comes to the living out of our faith, or whether we have established our own religious “purity system.”

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let us come with thanks for the “disruptive compassion” of Jesus. For that compassion has found us, and because of it we are welcome at this Table this morning.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.