

SLD03.19.06 Third Lent
John 2:13-22
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Beside the Point”

Okay, so here we are on the third Sunday of Lent, schlepping our way together through this challenging season of reflection, repentance, preparation and sacrifice. You see, during Lent, we in this community of faith sacrifice at the very least our existential comfort...by facing our mortality, reflecting on our sin, repenting for our limitations, and preparing our hearts for Jesus' death and descent into hell.

So far, during the first two weeks of Lenten worship, or two and a half weeks since we start with Ash Wednesday, we've faced the heart-dropping reality of our personal death; both the wildness *and* the wisdom to be experienced in the wilderness; and the maddening *disorientation* as well as the refreshing *reorientation* God often works through the chaotic, beast-ridden, angel-sprinkled 'gaps' in our faith and in our lives.

We've looked, too, at Jesus' perennial and uncompromising demand of his disciples to surrender *our whole lives* to him, and just how hard, even impossible, that demand often feels. Keeping our minds set not on human, but on divine things, is a whole lot easier said than done.

And now, today, we look together at what can happen even to those who are *trying* to set their minds on divine things, to good folks genuinely trying to do the right thing. Today we look at how Jesus addresses even folks who pay attention to God's law and follow the rules and do the best they can to measure

up to the demands of their religion, of their church, and of their God. And what we see is, frankly, pretty discouraging. 'Cause what we see is Jesus yelling at them in anger.

Now last week, Jesus had the good manners to keep his yelling in the family. Last week Jesus only yells at Peter, whom he knows loves him and will put up with it. I mean, who of us doesn't yell the most at the people we love most? Even though, what was Peter trying to do last week but protect Jesus and maybe bone-up the movement a little?

But this week...well, this week Jesus is frankly out of control. This week – I don't know - maybe it's because his dismal destiny is drawing closer – this week, Jesus loses it with strangers. And not just any strangers, either. I mean, if Jesus had blown his stack out in the desert with, say, a couple of rude camel drivers on their way to Jericho, this story might not even have made it into the gospels. But no...the strangers with whom Jesus chooses to go ballistic are your basic faithful first century Palestinian Jews doing what your basic faithful first century Palestinian Jews are *supposed* to do – are *commanded* by Mosaic law to do – travel at Passover from all over creation, at their personal expense, mind you, clear to the Temple in Jerusalem, to offer sacrifices and prayers to their God. Now you just can't fault them for that, / don't think.

I mean, seriously, these people were really not doing anything Jews hadn't been doing for millennia. And, you know, the system taught by the Torah for animal sacrifice is pretty complicated – it all depends on what you can afford and what you're asking for and whatnot. And since it's kind of a pain to haul your

prescribed pigeons or goats or lambs or whatever clear from Sidon or Damascus or wherever you're from, well, a helpful system of animal vending had grown up around the Temple. Think of it as Traveler's Aid.

What's more, since your basic faithful first century Palestinian Jew's Temple dues can only be paid in Tyrian coinage¹, it makes sense to have moneychangers nearby for the worshippers' convenience – same as any airport or shopping area that caters to foreign visitors. Having a bunch of them around just keeps 'em competitive. In fact, it could be said that the whole commercial enterprise around the Temple was for the convenience and support of the faithful.

But the thing is, Jesus was in a *mood*.... I don't know...maybe it's a Lenten thing. Maybe there's just something about that day when Jesus stands in the Temple observing the all comings and goings that keeps everyone convinced God's happy with them.... Maybe it's something about the imminence of Passover, and Jesus' awareness of who's going to be the sacrificial lamb this year.... Maybe there's just something about facing your own death that makes a body impatient with anything that falls short of true, or real, or straight on target....

All we know for sure is that something in Jesus snaps and he loses it. In public. Very uncool. Very bad for the movement. Right in front of the priests and God and everybody, Jesus loses control and starts acting out all the fury and frustrations that have been building up inside him for who knows how long - and

¹ C.K. Barrett, The Gospel According to St. John, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1978, p. 197, 14.

proceeds to whip the beasts out of the temple, and pour out the coins of the moneychangers, and turn over their tables, and yell at the dove-sellers and generally make of himself a loud and embarrassing public nuisance. You'd think he worked for the Open Door.

So when he has finally calmed down, the writer of the gospel of John tells us, the Jews ask Jesus for a sign to justify his bizarro behavior. I mean, what's *his* excuse, the Jews want to know.

I need to say here that the writer of the gospel of John is forever setting up the "Jews" as the bad guys over against Jesus, which has caused a lot of unjustifiable anti-semitic activity over the millennia. So let's pause a moment here to remember that Jesus was himself a Jew, and a faithful Jew - a scholar and a devotee of Mosaic law, who came not to change the law but to fulfill it.

So the 'Jews' who are asking Jesus for a sign, for some explanation of why he's lost his marbles, they and Jesus are related, members of the same race, the same family, the same religion. They're just a little non-plussed at Jesus' behavior, the way you or I would be if some member of this church marched in during worship and started yelling and turning over the communion table and throwing hymn books on the floor and generally abusing us verbally for doing what we thought was worshipful. That'd set us back a bit, wouldn't it?

So we can understand why the other Jews ask Jesus for a sign, a miracle, some evidence that he has some justification for acting out the way he just did. And Jesus, he refuses to give a sign to them. Instead he throws out some

gobbledygook about their destroying the Temple and his rebuilding it in three days.

Okay, now, it took, what, 83 years to build the Temple in Jerusalem? I know John says 46 years but gospel writers aren't known for their statistical prowess.² So, it takes almost a hundred years to build the Temple and Jesus is talking about destroying it and re-building it in three days? You can see them rolling their eyes.

Now John tells us outright that Jesus is talking about his body as the temple and we know that anyway because we've heard the story so many times. But the Jews around Jesus, they don't have any idea what he's talking about, including his disciples (who are also Jews, of course.) In fact, according to John, it isn't until after Jesus' resurrection that anybody can piece together what he meant that unforgettable day in the temple.

Meanwhile, the folks hanging around, the ones who know Jesus together with the ones who don't, they all pretty much believe he's lost his ever-loving mind.

What do you think?

What do you think is so upsetting to Jesus about the commerce in and around the temple that day?

Over the years people in churches have apparently come to believe that this whole story is about how we shouldn't sell things in the sanctuary. How we can avoid Jesus losing his temper if we just sell our Valentine's carnations out on

² Ibid. p. 200.

the lawn instead of in the narthex. Or call the money we get for our T-shirts or car washes 'donations' instead of 'revenue.'

Except up North, of course. Now, up North I hear they're pretty unapologetic about selling stuff in the sanctuary – you know, hotdogs and bird houses and raffle tickets and whatnot – just to keep the church going. Horrors! Here down south, why, we've got our principles, haven't we. We cover *our* operating costs with our pledge system, right? Reckon Jesus is more likely to keep his cool around us?

I'm not so sure. I'm not even convinced it's really the commercial activity in and around the Temple that gets Jesus so upset in the first place. I wonder if Jesus' outrage at all the Temple marketplace isn't maybe aimed more at the false religiosity that's behind it, at the faithless belief in a transactional system, not only between worshippers and animal vendors, but between worshippers and their God.

The buying and selling and where it's located is entirely beside the point. If the exchange of money and purchase of animals for sacrifice went on down the street at the fruit market, it would have made Jesus just as mad. The issue is not so much the presence of goats and sheep and moneychangers in the temple as it is the meaningless, mechanical system of religious sacrifice they represent.

What Jesus is so upset about is that all these 'good' people lining up to change their homeland coin into temple lucre so they can buy the sacrificial animal appropriate to their personal budget, spiritual status and request of God, imagine that they are thereby satisfying Mosaic law and fulfilling their religious

obligation. Worse still, they may imagine that cooperation with this system will yield them whatever it is they may need or want of God that day. I believe it is the transactional tidiness, the quid pro quo, the tit for tat of this long-established, mutually beneficial barter system with God that so drives Jesus out of his ever-loving mind.

And why? Because Jesus knows that what God wants from those who seek God, who love God, who worship God, is not the sacrifice of doves or goats or sheep but the sacrifice our hearts. Jesus knows that what God demands from us is not all our stuff, or all our ritual, or even all our activity in and around the church. What God requires of those who follow Jesus is all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind.' That's the greatest commandment, says Jesus in Matthew 22:36, to love God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind. And the second is like it: that we shall 'love our neighbor as ourselves.' On these two commandments rest all the law and all the prophets, he says.

Hear anything in there about animal sacrifices? Or church night suppers? Or Session meetings? Or PW luncheons? Or PNO? Or even mission trips? Or any of the other activities in and around the church?

No, we don't. Because these activities are only important to the extent that they reflect our love of God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. Anything else, everything else, is beside the point. And the passion and the focus and the insight of that kind of God-loving? *that's* what was missing the day Jesus lost it at the Temple. And that's what's missing in our own lives, and in the life of our church, when our activities

become mechanical or lifeless or sacrificial – when our busyness becomes disconnected from our love of God and neighbor and self. *That's* when, as the prophet Hosea writes, “Though they offer choice sacrifices...the Lord does not accept them.”

The other day, my son Christopher asked me a riddle; he said, “what did the five fingers say to the face?” “Slap!” And that's just how today's Lenten lesson feels to me: like a slap in the face of my own busyness, never mind the relentless busyness of the church.

Lent. First Jesus slams us with death, then he treks us out to the wilderness, then he yells at us, then he turns over our table and slaps our existential face. Reckon what he's trying to get us to grasp before he dies?

The Psalmist sings, “Sacrifices give you no pleasure; if I offered a holocaust, you would refuse it. My sacrifice is this broken spirit. You will not (surely, you will not) disdain a contrite and humbled heart.” (Ps. 51)

Maybe *that's* the point.

To the glory of God. Amen.