

This story we just heard—Jesus cleansing the Temple—is told in all four gospels. On the essentials of the story all four storytellers are agreed. But as with any story told from four different perspectives there are going to be some differences as well. Most significant is the question about when this actually happened? In the synoptic memory it happens in Holy Week: in Matthew and Luke it's on the same day that Jesus enters the city, on the afternoon of what we call Palm Sunday. In Mark it's on the following day—the Monday of Holy Week. In all three cases, in other words, this happens at the end of Jesus earthly life.

And yet as we heard John telling the story today, we are only at the second chapter of his Gospel—very much at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In John's Gospel, Jesus makes several annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem, but this conflict comes right at the beginning. It's unlikely that Jesus did this twice; so from a historical perspective most people think it is John who has the timing wrong. But from a theological perspective it's important to see what John is doing with the story: he's putting Jesus in complete control of the narrative and suggesting that Jesus is picking a fight very early in his ministry; that he's drawing a line in the sand from day one.

It's not a big deal. What *is* a bigger deal is that John unfortunately and consistently uses this phrase “the Jews” in his narrative. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is taking on *the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders*. In other words, he's challenging the religious establishment in Jerusalem—the power structure. It's pretty clear that John *means* exactly what Matthew and Mark and Luke say: after all Jesus is a Jew and so are his followers and many others. John doesn't mean *all* first-century Jews (and certainly not all twenty-first century Jews.) That should go without saying but Christian anti-Semitism is alive and well so it must be said, not to be “P.C.” but to be accurate. John is talking about the “powers-that-be” or if you must, he's talking about the clergy.

Most of us probably don't carry around in our heads a picture of what the Temple in Jerusalem was like. We need to remember it's not the same as a synagogue or a church in terms of its reason for being. It's a whole complex with courtyards and lots of activity going on. I had Karen put an architectural drawing on the sermon notes for today so you can get a better picture in your mind's eye of where Jesus is. The animals are supposed to be there; they are there for the purpose of being purchased and sacrificed. Remember what it says in the first chapters of the Book of Leviticus? That part of the Law is about making burnt offerings to the Lord. Do you remember that when Jesus was born, at the time of his mother's purification, that Mary and Joseph and Jesus traveled to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice according to the Law? (That's Leviticus again!) They need to sacrifice “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” and they go and do just that. (Luke 2:24b; Leviticus 12:2-8) It's Passover and so Jews from all over the country are coming into the city to make their sacrifices to God.

The money-changers are also there for a reason. The commandments (as we heard again today) make it quite clear that there can be no god but God alone. Yet the Roman coins—the imperial denarii—had the head of Caesar on them. And they didn't say “in God we trust.” In fact they seemed to suggest that Caesar was Lord. So in the outer precincts of the Temple, suppose you traveled from a place like Galilee and you came to purchase an ox or a sheep or a pigeon. You aren't supposed to pay with a Roman coin in the Temple, so you make an exchange—just like

changing into a foreign currency. You trade in your denarii for shekels which don't violate the commandment. And then you buy your animal and you make your sacrifice according to the Law of Moses. And then you go home, and life goes on.

We need to have some sense of this historical background if we mean to make sense of what is unfolding. I've heard people say that this text shows Jesus was human because he is angry. But John's Gospel and all the New Testament is clear that Jesus is fully human, and so yes, humans do get angry sometimes. Yes, Jesus gets angry but it's not the main point of this text.

I've heard people say that Jesus is attacking Jewish legalism. Or that the moneychangers were charging a high premium for the service they provided. But Jesus doesn't seem to be attacking *abuses* in the system only, but the *whole* system—and the whole underlying premise of the system. In a very real sense he's taking on the whole system of sacrificial theology, built on years of interpreting Leviticus. It's no wonder the clergy get mad.

I think that the reason we don't fully appreciate this text is that we have neglected the Old Testament, and especially the prophets. If we knew Amos or Jeremiah better we'd have a clearer sense of what is happening here. Consider the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:

Stand in the gate of the Lord's house (i.e. the Temple) and proclaim there this word and say, "hear the word of the Lord all you who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice with one another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place. . .

(Jeremiah 7:1-7)

Or consider the shepherd of from the small Judean village of Tekoa—Amos—standing up to the temple authorities in his own day (some 750 years before the birth of Jesus.)

I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings I will not accept them and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look at them. Take away the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Amos 5:21-24)

To the people of Jesus' day the actions in the Temple—whether early or late in his ministry—would have rung bells. His actions would have reminded them of the prophets of old, of Jeremiah and Amos and others. The issue is not a critique of liturgical practices. It's to say that even very good liturgy is no substitute for doing justice and loving mercy.

This text isn't in the bible to give us a nice history lesson in first-century religious practices. It's there to challenge us—today. And yet even as tables get turned over, there is ultimately a word

of good news here for us. Imagine Jesus coming in and throwing down *the Hymnals* and *the Prayerbooks* and you begin to grasp what is at stake here.

That doesn't mean we have to get rid of the *Hymnals* or the *Prayerbooks* to be faithful. But it does mean that we must always be clear in our worship about means and ends. The end is not perfect liturgy, a perfect sermon, or hitting all the right notes on every hymn. The end, with all due respect to our music ministers, to the Altar Guild and Eucharistic ministers and acolytes and ushers and the clergy and everyone else is that this isn't about us. It's certainly not about entertaining us or about fulfilling our own ego needs.

Worship points us toward God, who in turn points us toward our neighbor. We come here to encounter the living God, who calls us to participate in the healing of a broken world. Worship is about equipping the saints for ministry. If what we do here helps us to be better followers of Jesus on Monday and Tuesday then it is a good thing. But if when we walk out the door we leave it here, if we have nothing but a warm feeling or maybe even a sad feeling because it didn't go as we had hoped it would, then the truth is we'd be better off spending in other ways.

Worship is always in danger of stopping short of God, and becoming a form of narcissism. That is but one form of idolatry, of making what is less than ultimate into God. And when that happens, the church is always in danger of becoming a "marketplace."

Our vocation as God's people is "to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." We don't have to do that on our own. But the Church *as a whole* is called to care for the alien and the fatherless and the widows in our own time. Worship is meant to bring us closer to the God who's heart is breaking for the needs of the world around us—and especially the needs of the most vulnerable. If and when worship becomes some kind of escape from those needs, or a head-game, it becomes an idol.

So I think Jesus still shows up, and still turns tables over in order to call us back and to wake us up. It is so easy for religious institutions to forget their true calling. Yet our mission here at St. Francis is printed on the front of our bulletins week after week: "It is to help us to be instruments of God's peace in the world." Everything else: the vestry, the music program, the youth ministry and church school and adult classes and craft groups and knitters and everything we do here, exists for one purpose: to help us to become instruments of God's peace, to form us as Christ's disciples in the world.

If we love our worship of God more than God, then Jesus intrudes on our quiet Lent in order to turn tables over and call us back. He comes, even now, to remind us of Jeremiah and Amos and Hosea and Martin and Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa of Calcutta and all who speak a word on behalf of the poor and the outcast. We come here to find God, and God in turn points us toward our neighbor. Amen.