

March 4, 2018 – Third Sunday in Lent
Communion – Intinction
“Seeing What’s Right in Front of You”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Like me, you have probably heard not a few sermons on this passage as a justification for righteous anger. We read of Jesus, early in John’s gospel, but much later in Matthew, Mark, and Luke coming to the temple and going on a sort rampage as he turns over the tables of the money changers and sellers of sacrificial livestock. One might say, Jesus kind of flips out, making a whip of cords, driving them all out of the Temple courtyard shouting, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

In the other gospel narratives, the phrase is rendered something like, “Don’t make my Father’s house a den of iniquity or den of thieves.” No matter the version, and no matter the timing in the broader narrative, it does appear that Jesus is more than just a little upset and loses it as he tries to rectify the situation – the action and demeanor of which seems very uncharacteristic of him. To which the preacher often concludes sermonically, “See, Jesus was a human being just like us. Even HE got angry, just like you and I occasionally do.” (Pause) I suppose the idea is that this vignette is somehow to justify this very real human emotion.

Let me say from the outset, I certainly believe anger is a justifiable emotion – just like all our other emotions are as well. While we sometimes may get angry inappropriately, the emotion itself is neither good nor bad. Emotions cannot be evaluated in that way. Emotions simply exist. They occur – they are part and parcel of the human experience. Furthermore, Jesus may have been quite upset by what he saw occurring in the Temple gates and responded accordingly, but that’s not the point John was trying to make.

A little historical and geographical context may be helpful.

The Jews were duty-bound by law to offer sacrifices on various occasions and particularly at the time of Holy Religious Festivals. Passover, which was the setting for this story, is just one of those times. A pure and spotless lamb or goat needed to be brought by families to the Temple to be sacrificed by the priest to show respect for how God provided for their ancestors sparing them from the angel of death just prior to the Exodus from Egypt. If the family could not afford a lamb or goat, a pigeon would do.

Now, this was easy to do if you lived relatively close to Jerusalem. Walking with your lamb 10 or 20 miles was doable. But if you lived way up north, say for example near Cana in the region of the Galilee, and had to travel to Jerusalem, it would be nearly impossible to do so with the requisite sacrificial animal. Here is where the Temple vendors came into play. They would provide just what you needed. And if your currency was not approved by the Jerusalem treasury, no problem. Right there in the Temple courtyard were vendors

who could exchange your money for regional tender that you could then use to purchase your animal of choice.

This situation was surely rife with corruption. After all, here was an opportunity to make a buck, or I probably should say a denarius right? And while Jesus may have been responding in part to that reality, there was something even deeper going on.

Listen again to the dialogue that ensues after he gets their attention by turning over the tables. John records this way, “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ The Jews said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body.” (Pause)

Jesus was trying to help them see that they had their priorities all wrong. While the practice of temple sacrifice was not wrong, and while the sacred homage projected onto this holy edifice known as the temple was not ill-founded, they were missing the point. They were missing what was standing right in front of them. He, Jesus, the Divine representation of God was right there – right in front of them. All they had to do was look and see.

“Destroy the temple,” Jesus said to the leaders who asked him for a sign, “and in three days I will raise it up.” In John’s gospel Jesus isn’t talking about changing the policies around who sells what when. This isn’t about reforming temple practices. He wants to turn over tables, yes, but also to turn over the very pillars of existence through his very existence.

Jesus came to replace it all with **himself**. He said it clearly and succinctly several times throughout John’s gospel. “I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd, the true vine, the door. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the resurrection. And I am standing right here in front of you. Do you not see?”¹

The story invites us to ask a similar question. While we may not have the issue of temple sacrifice or even corruption in our church finances, the deeper question is, in what ways have our religious practices crowded out our own personal experience with the God who stands right in front of us? How have we become so preoccupied with what **MUST** be done that we miss the Divine presence that is right before us?

This hip replacement surgery has given me a brief glimpse at this whole idea. Major surgery has a way of getting your attention in a way I’ve not experienced before, not the least of which has been to slow down. The physical therapist’s required walks in my neighborhood have given me the opportunity to see heretofore overlooked sights with new eyes. I’ve given myself permission to stop, and notice, even appreciate the flower, the child, the newly remodeled home, even the warmth of the sun in new ways. Pausing

¹ Mihee Kim-Kort, *The Christian Century*, February 14, 2018, p. 20.

for conversations is welcomed as my body is given a rest. Are these not all manifestations of the Divine?

Given the pace of our lives, what are we missing – and it may be right in front of us? What have you already missed today in your haste to get to church on time or to make sure you had everything with you that you need for later on?

While I don't want to discount Jesus' need to ensure that those making their way to the temple for that Passover were doing so in a way that followed the requirements of Jewish law – I think we miss an important aspect of the story if we don't also heed his call to see what was right in front of them – God – the Divine Presence – in human form.

Somewhere, and somehow along the way God WILL get our attention – perhaps through hip surgery, a divorce, a diagnosis you were not expecting, the death of a loved one, the list is endless. The deeper question – will you pay attention? Will you see beyond the overturned tables to what you are really being invited to notice?

We can begin by practicing – even today. Pay attention when you walk out the door. What do you see? Listen deeply to the conversation during fellowship. Be mindful of all that God gives you – it is indeed an invitation to draw closer to all that life has to offer. Embrace your journey. It's the only one you'll ever get. May you sense God's presence as you do.

Amen.