

March 15, 2009

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year B

John 2:13-22

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

Before we can really wrest meaning for us from John's story of Jesus in the Temple, we must deal with the question as to whether Jesus was having a self-centered temper tantrum, just 'showing his human side', expressing righteous anger, or any of the other things that get said about his state of mind when he makes his whip of cords.

We read him as angry rather than patient, but Ambrose Bierce once called patience 'despair disguised as a virtue'¹. Most experts in psychology recognize that anger and depression are frequently two sides of the same coin with each marking the other. It is not complicated to imagine that many people in occupied Israel were bouncing between despair and violent rage both born of impotence. Many of us are carrying such feelings of impotence in the face of financial turmoil. We know about rage and despair that lead to free floating anxiety and makes every bad thing that happens seem much more significant and much harder to handle than might have been true a year or six months ago. To the degree that we are carrying feelings of despair or rage we may well find ourselves reading this story of Jesus in the Temple in light of them.

We might think about Jesus casting out those sacrifice sellers and money changers and think 'You go, Jesus'. Give the greedy bankers what is coming to them. Put things to rights. Restore my fortunes. Take care of the victims and the poor. In your face, you Temple authorities. Bring it on. There is a new sheriff in town and things are going to be different around here. Yippee Kai Oh.

We could easily read the story that way in light of what is happening in the world today and we would be wrong. The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple does have something for us in a time of uncertainty, but we have to set aside for now all those feelings that lead to violent and (we assume) righteous rage, revenge, blaming and bluster. We also have to set aside the reality of the despair that also rides on the heels of impotence.

¹ *The Devil's Dictionary* 1913

At least part of the point of the story is that Jesus is bringing to an end all the ways in which we dress up those feelings of rage and despair as virtue in relation to power and powerlessness. All of those realities in our lives are part of the impulse to make sacrifice, and its close cousin, to create scapegoats as we attempt to manage the tensions that come about when we circumstance sets us against one another. This isn't a cleansing of the Temple as much as an ending of the Temple. Jesus is bringing the Temple system to an end. It is a prophetic action. And everyone knew that when a prophet shot an arrow or broke a clay jar that the prophet was doing more than making a sign that pointed to some greater reality. The prophet was actually bringing about that which was prophesied.

Jesus was not suggesting the end of the Temple system. He was actually ending it. No wonder the authorities who thought they were the keepers of all that is good and righteous and holy were enraged to the point of legal violence when they sought to ensure a criminal's death for Jesus. You may recall that threats against the Temple were a big part of the accusations and charges against him in the end. This was not a matter of ensuring justice for the poor because the money changers were fleecing them on the exchange rate for Temple coinage. No, the sacrifices of the poor were included in what was being overturned, for the poor were the ones who sacrificed pigeons if they could not afford oxen or sheep. This action of Jesus wasn't about justice for the poor. This wasn't about restoring the Temple (which was essentially a slaughterhouse) to some kind of state of purity. Jesus was saying and going to be saying to Israel, "From now on, what you sought in the Temple, you will now find in relationship to me. You looked for the assurance of the presence of God in your midst through the institution of the Temple. You looked for ways to manage your anxiety and sin and despair and rage through the sacrificial system. Well, from now on your sacrifices have no power because their masking of violence has been stripped away and the paucity of your system that even includes capital punishment will be stripped away as you see the rank injustice done to me," says Jesus. "When you feel impotent and enraged in the face of circumstance – be it suffering the indignity of being an occupied country, or suffering the loss of your savings because of some mythical god-like thing called 'the market', you will find what you need only in relationship with me. All your blaming, all your despair, all your rage dressed up as longsuffering, all your desire to try and propitiate an angry and capricious God, -- all of it will be as nothing. Your alternative is to put your whole trust in God's grace and love, to let your baptismal promises become a reality in your lives in a new and deepened way."

'Easier said than done,' you might think, and in a way you would be right. We have all been taught in a multitude of ways and from a young age that we get ahead at the expense of others, that life is graded on a curve, that being able to consume is the measure of our worth, and that we can feel togetherness or unity only over against some unfortunate other. Jesus' ministry according to John began with a sign at the wedding of Cana -- a sign that the good wine has been kept back and is found in something as ordinary as water. Immediately after that story, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover and casts the money changers

from the Temple. The new wine that has been saved until now is the wine that is love rather than fear, love rather than death, love rather than sacrifice. I know that as I can accept the reality of God's love, then I can live with more trust and less fear. Nothing helps me as much as gathering with you around this table of the Lord, not only hearing but also enacting the story of God's love by which all our sin and violence and despair is unmasked and the way of absolute integrity opened to us. In this time of clear uncertainty in which the false God of 'the market' has been exposed and the tables of our economic system have been overturned, this table remains upright and the invitation to live knowing that we are loved is the source of real power, liberating hope and the assurance that our worth is discovered as we learn that we are loved.

As always, I invite you to use a brief time of silence for prayer, perhaps asking that you may become particularly aware of God's love for you this day and in the days to come. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray....