

Third Sunday in Lent (RCL/B)
John 2.13-22
March 19, 2006
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

The story of Jesus' cleansing of the temple is included in all four Gospels. As usual, though, St. John's version is a little different than Matthew, Mark and Luke's. For starters, he places the event at the **beginning** instead of at the **end** of Jesus' public ministry. So why does this story show up in Lent? Because right here at the start of the story, St. John slips in the **only** prediction of Jesus' passion in this, the Fourth Gospel. It comes when Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2.19).

The destruction of the temple Jesus was talking about occurred on the cross on Good Friday. The crucifixion was the result and the enactment of His being consumed with zeal for His Father's house. Once the physical temple had been the locus, the laser-like focus of God's presence on this earth. But with the Incarnation, the birth of the Son of God, God's presence shifted from the Holy of Holies inside the heart of the temple to the body of the Holy One, the Beloved, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus isn't walking among us as a human being anymore, but God's presence in this world is still strongest in and through Him. We come here to worship, we seek out Word and Sacrament because these are the means of grace, the promised and predictable channels through which God's love flows into our lives. If we would approach God's throne in prayer, the altar is the best place to do it. If we would draw closer to God's heart, the sanctuary is the best place to do it. If we would be gladdened in our sorrow, confirmed in our joy, enlightened in our confusion, comforted in our sadness,

strengthened in our weakness, healed in our sickness, forgiven in our sinfulness, guided in our search for God's will for our lives, the sanctuary is the best place to be.

At our visioning last week, the very first priority that came up for our faith family is the evangelism of our Sunday School parents. We are blessed with over 225 children and youth between the ages of 3 and 18 registered in our Christian education program. If they were all present at one time, we would have to pack them like little sardines into this sanctuary. But they're not all present at one time. Unfortunately, some of them and their parents have never been in this sanctuary or are here only infrequently.

To evangelize Sunday School parents means to draw them in love from the parking lot into the sanctuary. If I **saw** the parents who bring their children to Sunday School but not to worship, I would tell them if they feel they **must** choose between education and worship, they should go with worship. I have heard this from the Child in Our Hands Christian education experts, and I agree with them. If children are dropped off at the Sunday School door by parents who don't worship, they will get the inevitable message that Christian education is for kids and they will stop growing in their faith as soon as their Sunday School career is over. They will also deduce that worship is for holy rollers and that you can be a fully alive Christian without worshiping. Not so.

How do we change the way folks have thought and acted for a long time, though? The **good** news is that the parents of our Sunday Schoolers value Christian education and bring the kids here on Sundays. The **bad** news is that some of the parents and kids aren't drinking deeply or at all from the well of worship. They're not swelling our community's voice of praise with their songs. They are not feasting on the food of heaven. They are

not sinking their roots into the Word. They are not meeting and being embraced by Christ where two or three are gathered in His name.

Jesus' making a whip of cords and driving cattle and sheep out of the temple, His overturning of moneychangers' tables and pouring of coins onto the marble floor in a rain of change, wasn't orchestrated to prove to us He could get angry! In St. John's Gospel Jesus didn't even say the sellers of livestock and the currency exchange wizards had made the temple into "a den of thieves" by their dishonesty. The way the Fourth Gospel tells the story, Jesus isn't criticizing **abuses** in the sacrificial system laid out in the Book of Leviticus. He's attacking the system itself. He's saying, "Don't rely on burnt offerings to make your peace with God. Rely on **Me**, look to **Me**, recognize God in **Me**. Worship in holiness and in truth."

Jesus was asking the Jews of His time to radically change the way they thought about sin, grace, forgiveness and the way they went about doing religion. We've got to believe He's asking some of that of **us**, too. We have to be willing to initiate well-thought-out, prayerfully conceived changes that will draw **inside** those who are literally and figuratively **outside**.

If we really want to **tell** and **be** Good News to a fair number of basically unchurched Sunday School parents, we have to listen to what keeps them away and learn what would attract them.

I'm not saying we should start to offer manicures in the narthex or financial incentives for worship attendance, but I **am** saying we should be willing to move beyond our personal comfort zones to invite and welcome newcomers. I can't help but think of nametags as a little example of this big challenge. In the bulletin each week we tell

visitors with questions to approach anyone wearing a nametag. But how many people will they have to choose from? Will they find **anyone** wearing a nametag ☺? I've heard several reasons people have for not wearing theirs. Top on the list used to be forgetting them at home. We now have magnetic boards in Fellowship Hall and in the narthex to eliminate the memory hurdle. Others have basically told me they don't want to feel like banded birds. My advice is, unless you're part of the Witness Protection Program, in which case you are going under an alias anyway, get over it for the general good! Extend yourself to visitors by this simple gesture of hospitality, and also give a leg up to the person who would like to greet you but for the life of him can't remember your name.

This is just the beginning of a much longer conversation. May the Holy Spirit inspire us to see and do whatever is necessary to teach people that Jesus is where God's presence is focused like a laser, and to show them the light of God's face shining in Jesus Christ, proclaimed in Word and celebrated in Sacrament. Amen

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