

NO STONE UNTURNED
Sermon for Lent 3B—Jn 2:13-22
LPC, 3/8/15

I wonder what it would be like if Jesus showed up this morning with a whip and started throwing things around. I imagine it would be pretty upsetting.

We've heard the story of Jesus "cleansing" the Temple many times, and because it's Jesus who did it we assume that the Temple and the people who were selling animals and changing money deserved what they got.

We'd never sell animals or change money at Lawrencefield, so we assume we're safe from Jesus' zeal. But let's consider where that animal market and change-making stemmed from. Those practices, which seem so foreign to us, really came from impulses that we in fact share.

First, the money changers. We know that the coinage in general circulation bore the likeness of the Emperor, who was worshiped as a god by the Romans. These idolatrous coins, the Jews felt, were unworthy of offering to the one true God. Therefore, special Temple coinage was minted for which the Roman money could be exchanged, so that money offerings to the one true God would not bear the image of a pagan and false god.

Think of the impulse behind this. This was a good-faith effort to obey the First and Second Commandments, which we happen to have just heard today: You shall have no other gods before me, and you shall not make for yourself an idol. Changing your money at the Temple gate reminded people that God is holy, God is one, and God is worthy of our best and purest offerings.

Now, people being people, somebody at some point figured out that a profit could be made from the necessity of changing money. Money-changers began to take a percentage cut for their trouble. Undoubtedly this resulted in the humblest, most pious people being exploited and cheated, which is certainly not God's intent.

But consider that the practice of changing money before entering the Temple had a positive value. It reminded people that they were on holy ground. Any physical preparation for entering God's house ideally prepares people mentally, emotionally and spiritually for worship. At its best, putting on our Sunday best for church accomplishes the same purpose. Money-changing grew from genuinely holy intentions.

Now for the doves and animals. We know that the Jewish Law provided an intricate program for the kinds of sacrifices which were required of people on certain holy days, at certain life stages and under certain circumstances. The idea behind this was to recognize God's sovereignty and our utter dependence on God. God gives us all that we have, and in gratitude, or in contrition, we offer back the first and best of our produce.

Even the Jews no longer offer animal sacrifice. We certainly don't. Thank goodness! What a mess! What a smell! Not to mention the poor animals! But I wonder if in dropping the practice of sacrifice we have lost a useful reminder of God's sovereignty and our dependence on God. If we no longer offer back to God the first and best of our treasure, it's easy to forget that God gives us all that we have.

My point is that the offerings described in today's Gospel lesson, although condemned by Jesus here, were originally intended to glorify God, which is our intent too. If we are not to offer sacrifices, how do we demonstrate our recognition of God's sovereignty and our utter dependence? How do we remember that God gives us all that we have? How do we do justice to God's holiness? Because those needs remain, even if the money changing and animal sacrifice requirements have been lifted.

Jesus threw out the dove-sellers and money changers because the practices, through human greed and carelessness, had become a travesty of what was intended. Undoubtedly he offended a lot of people who thought of these practices as legitimate piety. But, interestingly enough, Jesus was not particularly interested in piety. Jesus was interested in transformation. He says as much.

"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up!" That's a transformative statement if there ever was one. The author John helpfully points out that Jesus is talking about his own death and resurrection. We all believe in Jesus' resurrection, don't we? That's not particularly challenging. Or is it?

Frankly, there's plenty of challenge here for us, and it has to do with the fact that this is the Jerusalem temple we're talking about. The Temple doesn't mean anything to us Christians today, but let's not forget how central, how holy, how precious the Temple was to the Jews.

Now think of what is most central, most holy, most precious to you. This doesn't have to be a building; in fact most likely to be most precious to you is not anything material, but something like your identity, your relationships, your integrity, your health, or something like that. What would happen if that were destroyed?

There is promise here, and there is challenge. Jesus says he will rebuild the temple in three days, so by extension, he can rebuild you too, whatever happens to you. The challenge is that Jesus can only rebuild you to the extent you are willing to surrender to him. Jesus can only transform what you are willing to let him work with.

That may be why the poor, the ill, the old, the very young, those who have so little to give up, are most open to Jesus' healing in the Bible. Those of us who have more, have more to surrender before God can heal, transform, and resurrect us.

St. Paul says somewhere that your body is a temple. What in your temple needs to be driven out, that Jesus may raise you up again?