

Loving God and Neighbor

God gave Moses the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, we heard earlier this morning. After receiving the Ten Commandments, the Jewish people developed and codified a lot of ritual laws based off them. That's mostly what the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy focus on. Even in those times, people were failing to abide by God's rules for living, particularly in the areas of loving Him, and caring for neighbors.

We see that play out today, in the world around us. People are so self-absorbed that they seem to think the world revolves around them – even we sometimes fall into that line of thinking! When we do that, we can easily become misguided in our own way of thinking and doing things. We become like the ancient Israelites the writer of the book of Judges wrote of repeatedly, when he said, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit,” (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

The same thing could be said when Jesus was doing His earthly ministry. Granted, Judea had a nominal king, of the Herodian dynasty – but those guys were just straw bosses for Rome. They didn't have any real power. The real power in Judea in Jesus' day was in the hands of whoever was the Roman governor.

We talk about one governor specifically during Holy Week, who became world-famous for ordering Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday. Remember his name church? Pontius Pilate. That's who had power at that time – and if he wanted to keep power, he had to keep the Jewish religious leadership friendly to him, so they wouldn't complain to his boss – whichever Caesar it was at the time in Rome.

While we're on the topic of Holy Week, we're going to look at a passage in John's gospel of an event that the synoptic gospels, those are Matthew, Mark, and Luke, place on the Monday of Holy Week after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to John 2:13-22. **Read John 2:13-22.**

Liturgy in Worship

It's interesting that John places this story which occurs near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry right after the first miracle He performed at the wedding in Cana. For John, Jesus flipping tables at the temple is more an inauguration of Jesus' earthly ministry rather than the culmination of it. We need to be aware, and keep in mind something obvious here – what happens at the temple matters to Jesus. In all the stuff He does in the gospels out in the world – the teaching, tending, miracle working – we must never separate His work in the world with His work done in worship. Worship forms – and informs – how we live out the good news in the world, and how we live out the good news in the world forms – and informs – our worship.

In worship, whether we realize it or not, we use liturgy. The original word we get our word “liturgy” from means “public work.” Here momentarily, we’ll celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion together. The Great Thanksgiving is a very deep, very ancient liturgy of the Church. It begins, “The Lord be with you.” Over the years, I’ve noticed it’s a great way to get people refocused on what matters, and a very polite way to quickly bring sidebar conversations to a close!

John’s gospel tells us “when it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went to Jerusalem. In the temple courts He found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money,” (John 2:13-14). Just imagine that. The temple was a central location for the Jewish religion. After the northern tribes had been carried off into exile, there was a Jewish diaspora that returned year after year to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem.

Scholars suggest that at the time, Jerusalem had roughly 50,000 inhabitants. During Passover week, the number of people in Jerusalem would swell to around 200,000. That’s a lot of people! The streets were packed! Market places, taverns, and hotels would have been overflowing with people. I suppose it would be about like Sidney when all the hollering in the hills is going on at Country Concert every summer.

Corruption in the Temple

And then there’s the temple. The seat of Almighty God on earth. Every good Jew was expected to be there at some point during the Passover celebration. Passover for the Jews, is akin to our Easter. It’s their most holy day of the year. A time to remember the powerful act of God in freeing them from slavery in Egypt by striking down all the firstborn who weren’t in houses with the blood of the lamb painted on their door frames. Year after year they celebrated this holiday. And so, the religious elite saw a good way to line their pockets. “Let’s set up booths along the temple courts, so people can buy unblemished cattle, sheep, and doves to sacrifice,” they may have said to each other. And so, they did. The levitical priests who worked in the temple complex also had the role of inspecting sacrifices. It stands to reason that even though a shepherd brought a choice, unblemished lamb to the offering, some of these crooks could find a blemish – and offer to sell their own “unblemished” lamb for a higher cost.

And then, there were the money-changers. Jewish people were coming from Rome, Persia, Greece, Egypt, and as far away as modern Pakistan for this celebration. All these different areas use different currencies – in those days, coins – to represent value. Even though Rome ruled over Judea, you could just forget about dropping your Roman denarii into the offering plate. The temple priests do not want any of those! They only accept the temple shekel. Your denarii, or whatever else you have coin-wise in your pocket, must be exchanged into temple currency before you can put it in the offering box.

And of course, just like credit card issuers today, they charged a fee for currency conversion, always – always – to the benefit of the money changer, and not the ordinary person. Think of all that going on in the background. You have the aroma of the barnyard. The sounds of heckling sellers – “Get your cattle here!” “Best doves on

the planet over here!” “Two-for-one special over here on unblemished sheep!” and the money changers – “Only 5% exchange rate here!” – and the sounds of baaing sheep, cooing doves, mooing cattle. Mercy, what a stinky, noisy, greedy place! Can you imagine trying to pray in a place like that?

I don’t think I could preach in a place like that. Too many distractions. I’d lose my place, even with a typed manuscript, and never be able to find it again! Look what Jesus does. “So He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves He said, ‘Get these out of here! Stop turning My Father’s house into a market!’” (verses 15-16).

Jesus’ Agenda

See friends, Jesus had an agenda that day when He went to the temple – and it begins with worship. He has an agenda for waking you up this morning and bringing you here to New Hope – and it begins with worship. Right worship. Not right in form or structure, but in intention. Right in presence. Jesus was focused – He is focused – on the heart during worship. A statement from the Psalms comes to mind for His disciples, which John records in verse 17. It’s an abbreviated quote from Psalm 69:9: “for zeal for Your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult You fall on me.”

The next thing we see – and I want to point this out, specifically – is a statement about “the Jews.” Now, when John uses that in the gospel – any of the gospel writers, actually – they refer to “the Jews,” they don’t mean all Jewish people. They’re talking about the Jewish religious political establishment. So John tells us, “the Jews then responded to Him, ‘What sign can You show us to prove Your authority to do all this?’” (John 2:18). See, the leadership was aggravated. Jesus just disrupted their money-making rip off scheme.

If it were happening today in a church like ours, we might ask Him, “Who do you think you are?” That’s what they’re getting at with their question. They want to know – who does He think He is? Who gave Him the right to do any of that? Of course, we know the answers to these questions – Jesus is God. The Father has given Him the right and authority to do all these things.

I Will Raise It Up

Look what Jesus says next – and this really gets the leadership of the day’s goat, if you will – “Destroy this Temple, and I will raise it again in three days,” (verse 19). We’re also told in verse 21, “the temple He had spoken of was His body.” We see that on Easter morning. We know it. Jesus died a horrific death on the cross on Good Friday, and physically rose from the dead three days later. He’s telling them, in the way He does throughout the gospels with metaphors and parables, about Himself. He’s going to die – but He’s resurrected three days later.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ must be the most beautiful mysteries of our faith. And in the sacraments of the Church, we participate in those glorious mysteries – visible signs of the inward grace of God, present with us, saving us –

which, according to Simon Peter, “Even angels long to look into these things,” (1 Pet.1:10-12). I suppose we can’t blame the temple priests for taking Jesus literally that day during Passover week long ago. They didn’t understand what He was talking about. “They replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and You are going to raise it in three days?’” (John 2:20).

They were clueless. Construction on the temple where Jesus flipped the tables that day had been started under King Herod, known to history as Herod the Great. He wasn’t great, though. This was the same king we talk about on Epiphany Sunday, who decided to kill all the boys aged two and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding area, because he viewed Jesus as a threat to him keeping his throne.

What Brings Us to Worship?

John closes today’s lesson recording, “after Jesus was raised from the dead, His disciples recalled what He had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken,” (verse 22). This is the gist of today’s passage. Right presence in worship, and raising up. Right presence is about the intentions we bring to worship and proper ordering, or prioritizing, of worship in our lives. Do we come to be seen by others as holy, or to worship the Most High God who created us, loves us, and redeems us?

Do we gather in worship to gain social and political capital, or to gain our lives by surrendering ourselves fully to God? In the same vein, raising up is the means and the fruit of right presence. Our worship is about the Resurrection. We are being raised up as we gather, sing, pray, and commune together around word and table.

So, we close with questions about what we do when we gather. What will raise us up? What honors God first and lifts others into His presence when we come together? What distracts and demeans our time together in the sacred space? We live in a world that wants to destroy the body and the soul. How are we building others up? As we continue our journey through the Lenten season, and look forward again to Christ’s resurrection, what are we doing so that we are also looking forward to being raised with Him?

Prayer: Holy One, Creator of the stars and seas, Your steadfast love is shown to every living thing: Your word calls forth countless worlds and souls; Your law revives and refreshes. Forgive our misuse of Your gifts, that we may be transformed by Your wisdom to manifest for others the mercy of our crucified and risen Lord. Amen.