

Time to turn over some tables
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Lent 3
John 2:13-22

This third Sunday in Lent we have an interesting pairing of readings between our Hebrew Scripture and our Gospel. We hear the 10 commandments from Exodus and then the cleansing of the temple from John. What do these have to do with each other? Well quite a bit.

When asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus replied which we call the summary of the law that was not completely original with him. There is a legend that Rabbi Hillel who died when Jesus was about 7 years old was asked by a young man can you teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot. Hillel replied Love God, Love your neighbor, everything else is commentary. The other variation is, "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor, the rest is commentary go and learn." Now hold that statement that on these hang all the law and the prophets and let's look at the temple and today's gospel

The cleansing of the temple appears in all of the gospels, but John places it all the way at the beginning in Chapter 2. It is set directly after the first of the seven miracle stories in John that show Jesus' divinity. Please remember that John's gospel is written about 70 to 80 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. It is the least historical of the books, but the most theologically mature. The early church is in their final breakup with the Jewish world. In fact the Council of Jamnia somewhere around 90- 95 had declared that anyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is not Jewish and banned them from the synagogue. This piece of information is crucial to understand John's gospel.

I said that this is the most theologically mature gospel and possibly book in the bible. Jesus knowing full well of his relationship with God is teaching us about what is important to God. So the focus of John is the divinity of Jesus and his relationship with God and the end of the temple system. In short it is a message of love over law.

We read the Exodus passage with the 10 commandments as our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. The temple system that existed when Jesus was alive had far more than 10 commandments. There are about 615 commandments mostly found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The temple worship was based in a large part on these holiness codes and the focus was on purity and righteousness. The Pharisees were famous for the strict observance of the law and their demands that everyone do as well. It had become an economy based on quid pro quo. Do X and God will be happy and reward you. Do Y and God will press the smite button unless you offer the proper sacrifice to appease God.

It was all a very simple system, but one that had lost the real point of religion, if you accept that a loving relationship with God is the starting point. It was also an economic system that the priests depended upon for their rather comfortable living. Because of all this there was a lot of inertia regarding any change.

I believe John was intentional in placing the cleansing at the start of his gospel. Jesus, knowing from the beginning who he was opens his ministry by overturning the status quo, the way it had always been done. Oh yes he stood up to those that said the seven deadly words, "We have always done it this way." Last week we heard Peter trying to talk him out of confronting the priests and urging him as we often hear, have patience don't go up against the system like this.

"Patience, a quality of holiness may be sloth in the soul when associated with the lack of righteous indignation." Rabbi Abraham Heschel

Jesus was certainly not lacking in righteous indignation. Not in last week's gospel where he called Peter Satan and told him to get out of the way nor in this week's gospel. The Rev. Susan Russell a priest in California changed the final words that Jesus said when she used them in her sermon in last week to

"you are confusing God's wisdom with conventional wisdom... Conventional wisdom is the wisdom of the crowd — the belief system that undergirds how societies operate. Conventional wisdom is not automatically good or ethical, but it is the values that a society holds most dear and so you go against it at your own peril."¹

I had been looking for the right word to express what Jesus was doing at the temple and I think righteous indignation is exactly what Jesus felt. He was and is telling the powerful of the temple that they have missed the point of worship. Worship of God is relationship with God and not a transaction of goods and services. It is an economy unlike the economy of the world.

I think one of the great problems in today's world is this reluctance to challenge conventional wisdom. At least there is a feeling out there of helplessness. I believe that is why we trot out the "thoughts and prayers" line, but fail to then take action. This is in effect saying well I'm sorry, I'll pray for you but there is nothing I can do. The system feels like it is so broken that it cannot be fixed.

I have struggled over the past two weeks to find a way to bring up a topic that weighs heavily on my heart. I was a teacher for 24 years before going to seminary and every time there is a shooting at a school of any sort, my heart breaks. I have stood in front of a high school band of 200 and been the one to tell them that one of the members of their band had committed suicide the night before with a gun. I can't imagine being a teacher in Parkland Florida right now.

¹ <https://allsaints-pas.org/a-wrinkle-in-conventional-wisdom/>

We have seen over the past weeks since that tragic shooting in Parkland Florida something amazing. Now I am not advocating any one position on the issue of gun violence from this pulpit. I certainly do not have any great insight on the answer. What I want to hold up is the response of students in Parkland and around our country to this. They are bucking against the conventional wisdom that says there is nothing we can do or that the problem is too large, too complex. They are not willing to accept thoughts and prayers as enough. I will not pretend to have the solution on how we as nation will address this issue, but I admire these kids for getting involved and demanding that the adults in the room give them schools that are safe. I applaud them for saying yes the problem is a challenge but we must do something. I applaud them for being willing to turn over the tables in the temple.

The challenge I am giving to you this morning is not about a single issue, but to look at the passion of these young people. Applaud their willingness to stand up to conventional wisdom even if you think they are wrong and then work for something that really is important to you. Maybe it is something that you have strived to do before and felt you had failed. Maybe all of the defeats have worn you out and you wonder if you have any more to give. Maybe the problem just seems too large.

That was obviously on the mind of Pastor Steve Garvey this week in a letter from God that I posted on our Facebook page. In this letter God speaks to those of us and it is many of us who feel beaten down by all that is going on. I want to share with you the end of his letter.

“My Beloved, even in your discouragement I want you to hear my joy. You are a sparkling thread in my tapestry of the universe. Don't disparage yourself for not seeing what only I can see. I have imbued you with my grace, unseen even to you. You have given gifts you can never measure. In the end you don't give an offering. You *are* an offering. You have been present. That matters to me. I thank you. You will be present. That gives me hope. Let go of the outcome, forego judgment, and take courage. You are my child, my Beloved, in whom I am delighted. Be yourself, and let the universe be blessed.”²

Channel some of that passion of our young people, but above all else love God, love your neighbor, show that sparkling thread that you are and don't be afraid to turn over a few tables for God or your neighbor.

² To read the entire letter follow this link.

<https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections/zbre2l2a3galp6re76lwgrxs8gzww6>