

Lent 3 Year B 2021
March 7, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As we worship today on this Third Sunday in Lent, we hear and reflect on this gospel story of Jesus cleansing the temple. It's interesting that other than the crucifixion story, there are only two stories that appear in all four Gospels in our Bible. One is the feeding of the 5,000, and the other is this story that we hear today. Thus, it seems clear that this story is important.

Now what is also interesting is the placement of this story in each Gospel. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, this story comes during Holy Week, right at the end of Jesus' ministry. But in John's Gospel, the one we read today, this story comes at the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry, immediately after the wedding at Cana. So, in reality, the event probably happened during Holy Week. It was probably the last straw for those religious authorities, and they very likely decided that Jesus had to be killed because of the things he'd done. Because he was now threatening even their religious institution.

But John takes a different approach, placing the story at the beginning of his Gospel. You see, for John, the cleansing of the temple is a metaphor for all of Jesus' ministry. John's understanding is that Jesus came to *renew* the Jewish faith. He came to renew the faith; to challenge the institutional views of God and how people are meant to live out their lives of faith. And so, the cleansing of the temple is one piece of a much larger narrative about Jesus challenging social norms, traditions, and expectations.

In our Gospel lesson today, we see Jesus arriving in Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. It's a very chaotic scene. There are thousands of people in the street, and there's incredible bustle and noise, even in the temple itself. It was a time for peak business for all the religious traders. They were selling lambs and oxen and pigeons for sacrifices, and appropriate food for people to eat during the season.

So, Jesus walks into the temple, into the midst of all the chaos, and all the noise, and all the hustle and bustle. Jesus' anger becomes evident as he drives out the sheep, and the cattle, and he scatters the money all over the floor. He overturns the tables and he throws all the traders out into the streets. No one was spared Jesus' anger in that moment. And he shouts, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a marketplace!" Essentially, Jesus disrupts what is happening, turning the world on its head.

It probably didn't make a whole lot of sense to those that were working in the temple. They were just following tradition, doing what they had always done. So why is Jesus, purportedly a faithful Jewish man, so angry all of a sudden? Why is Jesus angry about all of this when no one else is?

The problem is that the animal traders and money changers were price gouging poor peasants who had come to the temple to make their religious sacrifices. They were trusted as authorities who could tell people whether their animals were "good enough" for the sacrifice to be pleasing to God. But these traders could make a great deal of money by telling people that the animals they had brought for sacrifice weren't perfect, and that they could buy a perfect animal right there in the temple. And the Pharisees allowed these corrupt practices in the temple because they were profiting off of it as well. The entire sacrificial system in Jerusalem revolved around taking money from the poor and suffering to make the rich and powerful *more* rich and *more* powerful. And Jesus has a problem with that. Jesus has come to turn the world on its head, and in

the Gospel of John, he begins by driving out the animal traders and money changers from the temple.

In our reading from First Corinthians today, we hear that “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” Jesus’ message doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to those who are in power, to those who are comfortable, to those who are profiting off of corruption. To those who have no need of salvation—or, as the Apostle Paul puts it, “to those who are perishing,”—Jesus’ message sounds like foolishness. Those in power often believe that they have no need for God. Anything they need in life is available to purchase or acquire. It sounds foolish to them that God’s love and salvation are free gifts that cannot be earned, and that all people are welcome in God’s kingdom.

But life is different for those who are in need—the poor, the outcast, the sick, the suffering, the hopeless—“to those who are being saved.” For these individuals, Jesus’ message carries with it the great and mighty power of God. These individuals are keenly aware that they rely on God to provide for them. For them, God’s love and salvation are deeply powerful gifts in their lives.

Several years ago, I went on a mission trip to Mexico City and the surrounding area. Part of our group visited a cardboard town, where individuals and families had hardly anything to call their own. But these individuals had a deep faith in God. Daily life and daily bread were seen as gifts from God, and the community was thankful for all that God provided them. They knew their need, and they knew that the systems in their world were such that they could not simply pull themselves out of poverty by their own doing. But they trusted in God to provide for them, they trusted in God’s love for them, and they trusted in God’s gift of salvation. They knew that they didn’t have to be rich and powerful and successful to earn God’s favor. They knew that God’s love and salvation were free gifts from God.

We also have times in our lives when we know our need for God. We may not know the life of homelessness or poverty, but none of us are exempt from suffering, or illness, or struggle, and in these times, we need God to provide love and forgiveness and hope for us. Today’s gospel reading, then, is good news for us, bringing us a message of hope that runs throughout all of Jesus’ ministry.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, we see him again and again challenging the status quo, crossing social norms, and breaking with tradition in order to care for and save those in need. We see again and again that the ways of the world do not have the final say. We see Jesus come to turn the world on its head, offering a message of hope, change and transformation to those in need. We see this ministry take shape as Jesus shares the good news with the Samaritan woman at the well—an outcast and foreigner. We see this ministry continue as Jesus blesses children, heals lepers, and as he eats with sinners and outcasts. Again and again, Jesus offers hope to the hopeless, protection for the endangered, justice for the oppressed, and acceptance for the outcast. And we see this ministry come to completion as Jesus spreads his arms wide on the cross to offer forgiveness of sins and welcome for all people in God’s kingdom.

Ultimately, we hear today that there is no salvation in riches and power and reputation. We hear that it’s foolish to believe that we can save ourselves. But we also hear that God in Christ has come to turn the world on its head, bringing hope and healing and salvation to us as gifts, given freely to us by our God who loves us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The first half of this sermon draws from Rev. Roseanne Anderson's sermon for Sunday, March 7, 2021, prepared for the North/West Lower Michigan Synod of the ELCA.