

Third Sunday in Lent  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

March 15, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19;  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

*By the way, that prayer I used is the last verse of the Psalm that the cancel choir just sang the first portion of. It's a fairly long Psalm, and you should take the time to read it, for it begins with the story of God's creation, telling the story of God, and it moves on until this final verse which I used as my prayer.*

It was usually with a bit of glee that I would tattle on my brother Danny when we were young. Waiting for the opportune time, I would announce to Mom, "Danny hit me" or "Danny messed up the game I was playing." It was "Danny did this" or "Danny did that." I was certain my mother would listen to my tale of woe and promptly turn to Danny and chew him out for the particular infraction he had done against his younger sister.

My glee would end abruptly, however, when Mom was done scolding him. For then she would turn to me; that look on her face that only a disapproving mother can give. It was my turn to be chewed out for my possible involvement in what had just happened. And I have to admit I very well could have instigated some of what my brother Danny did. I was not totally innocent and so I was not left off the hook.

I want you to remember that image as we consider our Gospel lesson this morning. Can we picture ourselves in this story? We're standing slightly behind Jesus, looking over his shoulder with a bit of glee, cheering him on as he upends the moneychangers' tables, as he drives out cattle and sheep and humans alike. "Great move, Jesus! Way to go! Give 'em the ol' one-two, the ol' heave-ho! Yeah, that's the way to do it!" See, we're twenty-first century Christians and we look at the Temple of Jesus' earthly days, and we look at how the religious authorities in the Temple had developed a rather ingenious plan to gather the pilgrims in and offer sacrifice, and then only too quickly do we show our righteous disdain for their practices. Now, our Gospel writer John doesn't imply that there was price-gouging going on, or extra profiteering beyond a fair sale. It wasn't an issue of economic injustice; it wasn't a matter of withholding worship opportunities from the poor – quite the contrary. The practice of selling animals and birds of varying prices for Temple sacrifice was a common-sense approach to Jews coming into Jerusalem, making certain the sacrifices they would to God were unblemished, because that's what the Law required. After all, a Jew making a pilgrimage from far away couldn't realistically transport different types of animals for sacrifice without the potential for them to get damaged along the way. Yet we see Jesus here angry at the entire scenario. Jesus is incensed with the very notion that goods can be bought and sold in a place so sacred, so holy; a place that has been set apart to draw into the presence of Almighty God and worship Him.

But before we cheer Jesus on once again when we hear this lesson, be clear that when the scolding is over, when the Temple religious authorities and their minions are roundly scolded and chewed out by Jesus, and every last table is overturned, we ought not think ourselves so innocent that our Lord's eyes don't turn to meet ours. Two thousand years may separate us from all that was happening in the Temple, but you and I as individuals, you and I corporately as the Church, may yet be the recipients of Jesus' steely glare – a look not unlike my mother's. We are not left off the hook here.

See I think the question becomes what tables in our lives are being upended, overturned by our Lord? What practices, what complacency in our lives, our ministries, our hearts, has Jesus shaken to the core with these Gospel words? Where have we been smugly self-righteous, certain that Jesus' critique is directed to others and their many faults, and all that Jesus brings us is approval or possibly a chuckle and a wink-wink at the things we do? Will we allow ourselves to be thoroughly rattled and upended by this story, by God's word this day, that we might be open and ready for all the rebuilding that Jesus Christ can do in us and for us?

I recall a member of my internship church (his name was Dio), and Dio once said to me following one of my sermons, "Vicar Nancy, I want you to hurt me." Now, I really didn't know what he meant by that same set of words and I thought it was really weird for him to say that. But as I grew to know Dio better, I think I began to understand what he meant, I think Dio was telling me that in my effort to preach the good news, how we have been made right with God through our faith in Jesus Christ – you know, the Lutheran mantra, "justified by grace through faith" – I had unintentionally neglected Jesus' call to repentance, and Jesus' call to obedience to God's commands, and Jesus' call to righteous living – those day-in and day-out ways of responding to God's love for us. Or if I hadn't neglected them, at the very least, I had not emphasized them in my preaching. Dio wanted to hear first, that he was a sinner; second, that he was a sinner redeemed by Christ; third, that he was a sinner redeemed by Christ who now was free to live in holy ways following Christ; and fourth, that Christ expected him to do so.

So, what I've been suggesting here is that Jesus' righteous anger is directed toward us and not just the Temple establishment of two thousand years ago. But a lot of us don't like to think about Jesus being angry. In fact, in some circles we have so thoroughly domesticated Jesus, who in our eyes is so meek and mild and gentle, that we've robbed ourselves of an understanding of Jesus as thoroughly passionate and zealous about life in relationship with God. We don't see how such passion and zeal might provoke Jesus to acts that we consider extreme, and we certainly don't see how His passion and zeal might impact us.

But that's really our problem, you know. Each of us, in a sense, creates our own images of Jesus, and we tend to resonate with the images of Jesus that we're really comfortable with, and so we resonate with the Jesus who is our friend, and we resonate with the Jesus who has compassion on us. Those are scriptural images of Jesus, they are true images – but so is this one. So is this one, an image of Jesus angry. And when this image of Jesus tossing out the moneychangers gets tossed in and amongst all of our images of a gentle Jesus, it shakes things up a little bit.

All four Gospels tell a version of this story of Jesus in the Temple, tossing out the moneychangers. The other three Gospels though, Matthew, Mark and Luke, put it much later in Jesus ministry, nearly in His last week of earthly life. John, alone, is the Gospel writer who takes this story and puts it very early in Jesus' life . . . really early, at nearly the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

It's called the "cleansing of the Temple." I find that kind of ironic, because I figure when Jesus was done, it was not clean in there, it was one big chaotic mess! But we tend to call it the "cleansing" metaphorically, the cleansing of the Temple, and that story in John takes place after the very first miracle that Jesus performed. That miracle was the story of Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding reception in the little town of Cana. So here we have Jesus, the life of the party at Cana, and we contrast that with Jesus' tumultuous presence at the Temple, where he essentially ended the party – and those two events just don't mix well together, the contrast could not be greater.

So, what is John trying to tell us here? That Jesus is much more than simply a miracle worker? That Jesus' influence will be felt in larger spheres than simply a little village? That the One who only reluctantly changed the water into wine (and then only at His mother's behest) now is the one who acts radically and decisively, no prompting needed. That Jesus now seems to know exactly what He is to do, and believes He has every clear right to do it. So we learn who Jesus is here, and we learn who He is as much in the placement of this story as its content.

Professor, author and preacher Peter Gomes says that when he was a child, he really liked hearing the story about Jesus in the Temple; he kind of got a kick out of Jesus being angry in church. So Gomes writes, "I must confess that this little bit of ecclesiastical deviancy appealed to me as a child, and not because it was exemplary behavior, which it was not, but because it was such fundamentally human behavior."

I guess the only way we can really resonate with this Jesus, in this story, is to look back into how it is such a human attribute. I can appreciate His being absolutely passionate and zealous here, because there are things you and I are actually passionate and zealous about – often we think about politics, or sometimes we're really zealous about hobbies or sports teams – and why wouldn't Jesus, fully human and fully God, also be passionate and zealous? Maybe not about sports teams (although I am sure Jesus really loves the Steelers like I do!) but I'm sure He is passionate about what is sacred, and zealous for all that is God's.

Now with all His passion, Jesus in this story sounds, to me, kind of like Clint Eastwood – you know, Dirty Harry in the *Sudden Impact* movie – when he says, "Go ahead. Make my day." Go ahead . . . make my day. This is how Jesus sounds. Go ahead . . . you destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem with your complete lack of sense of anything that's holy, with your buying and selling and every activity under the sun except real worship, but even if you destroy this Temple – my body – God will not be done. This Temple – my body – will be raised, and I will become that holy place, that sacred space where God and humans meet.

And so it is Jesus' body offered for us in this place for our sake this morning, which is that holy place where we might meet God . . . Word and Meal . . . gathered in community. Here Jesus

says He offers us life in its fullest. And through lessons like this one in John, we learn that Jesus is also willing to shake up our precious sensibilities once in a while. When we listen rightly to this lesson, we should be able to picture Jesus turning his disapproving gaze on you and me, and asking, “Why do you put up obstacles in my path?” We are made to consider just what it is we do or say, individually or as the Church, that gets in the way of God working **in** us, and God working **through** us for the world.

As a member of Trinity’s Strategic Planning team, I’ve been very involved in the revisions of the mission statement document that this congregation approved just two Sundays ago. And over the revision period, folks often asked for clarification about the definition of some of the words and phrases used in that document. One phrase from our Guiding Principles section was always brought to my attention by some folks – it was the one about having a “passionate spirituality.” People would say to me, “What do you mean? What is Passionate Spirituality?” I think this Gospel lesson is just the lesson to begin to help us understand what that means. Spirituality is the way we live with God each day, the way we live the Easter life in a Lenten world. And a passionate spirituality is when we live such a life with enthusiasm and courage and great hope. Or as Pastor Rolf Jacobson puts it, “Christian spirituality is not for cowards.”

So may we be passionate, like Jesus. Passionate about what it means to live daily with God. And then everyplace we go to love and to serve will become sacred space.

Amen.