

Third Sunday in Lent

*John 2:13-22*

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*"... his disciples remembered...."*

Some things are clear in a moment. A word is spoken and everyone within earshot knows exactly what it means. *Would you like to go out sometime? No. No ambiguity. No... well, maybe. Just... no.* Or an event occurs, and its significance is immediately apparent. The shot is taken as the buzzer sounds. If it goes in - there's a game tomorrow. If it misses the season is over. Either in or out. Either yes or no. Clarity in a moment. Absolute certainty about what a word or action means.

Some people seem to have that kind of clarity about almost everything. The stimulus package will create thousands of jobs. The stimulus package will fail. Billy must stay. Billy must go. Clarity. I envy those people. I wish that I could always see the world with that kind of confidence, the assurance that I know what the outcome of something said or done will be. But the reality is, I experience the world in a very different way.

When I perform a wedding, I usually tell the couple that the words that they say to each other are important, that they are promises that will change the course of their lives, but I also tell them that when those words are spoken, they cannot know fully what those words really mean. How can they know in that moment what life will bring to them? *I promise to love you, in sickness and in health, in times of joy and times of sorrow.* How can they know, in that moment, the significance of the promise? Twenty years later... thirty... forty. *Oh, that's what that promise meant!* Or this: *We are going to have a baby.* Who can understand, in that moment, how profoundly life will change? All of the laughter, all of the wonder, all of the pride, all of the fear.... *We are going to have a baby.* Such a simple little sentence; but when those words are spoken, who can imagine what those words will mean?

Sometimes we witness events and cannot imagine what the consequences will be. As we watched the news in stunned disbelief on September 11, 2001, how could we know what this horrific event would mean? We are approaching the sixth anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq. How could we have guessed on September 11 how that day would shape our future? How could countless families have imagined how that day would change their lives. Sometimes, we see clearly only in retrospect.

Now you would think that if Jesus of Nazareth were to go to Jerusalem, enter the courts of the temple - the very heart of Jewish life and worship - and start driving away those who were selling animals to be sacrificed, start overturning the tables of those who were changing money so that the temple tax could be paid, you would think that it would be perfectly obvious what was going on. And in one sense, it was.

The first thing that I want you to notice is that when John tells this story, he says that it occurs early in Jesus' ministry, on the first of his three visits to Jerusalem for the Passover. The other three gospel writers say that Jesus creates this little disturbance on his last visit to Jerusalem, and

that it was this display of righteous indignation that moved the religious establishment, those in charge of the temple, to seek to be rid of him. For John, the crucial event that led to his arrest and execution was the raising of Lazarus. In John, the scene in the temple is placed earlier in his story.

But the effect is the same. By driving out the sellers of animals and overturning the tables of the money changers, Jesus sets himself over against the system of worship and practice that dominated the religious landscape of his day. Let me tell you what I mean by that, first by suggesting what this story is not about.

This story is not about the people who were driven out of the temple. Some have read this story and assumed that those who were selling animals and exchanging money were corrupt - first century payday lenders, charging exorbitant prices for their animals or outrageous rates of exchange. That interpretation, I suspect, is based on those famous words found in Matthew, Mark and Luke: *My house should be a house of prayer... but you have made it a den of thieves.* We are not naive. We know that people can and do abuse systems that are designed for the common good. Call the Better Business Bureau. Ask them about scams that have already sprung up that take advantage of provisions of the economic stimulus package. Ask those who invested with Mr. Madoff. And ask the TV preachers who ask their followers to support their ministry, but mean by that, *support my extravagant lifestyle.* Greed. Greed that abuses. But I'm not sure that is what was happening in the court of the Jerusalem temple.

The act of sacrifice, offering the blood of something living to the holy God, was central to the way first century Jews practiced their faith. Because many worshipers traveled long distances to offer their sacrifice in Jerusalem, it was not practical for them to bring an animal with them. So the selling of animals was a necessary convenience - something that supported the system. The temple tax, assessed on anyone who worshiped in the temple, had to be paid in coinage that did not have a human figure on it - a human figure could be considered a graven image and was not allowed in the temple. If you go to Italy or France, you will exchange your dollars for euros and expect to pay a small fee for the convenience. If you go to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, you will exchange your Roman coins which have the image of an emperor on them, for Tyrian coins which have no human figure and you will expect to pay a fee to those who made your worship possible. I know of no evidence that those who sold animals or changed money were charging exorbitant prices or fees for their services. I think that the problem was not those who engaged in this commerce. The problem was the system that the commerce supported.

We have to be careful here. Some want to interpret this event as an attack on Jewish faith, a renunciation by Jesus of his own religious heritage. That also is not what this story is about. There had been, for centuries, a lively debate among faithful Jews about how their faith should be practiced. What kind of worship does God desire? The system of sacrifice was designed as a way for small, frail, finite human beings to approach this God who was beyond their grasp and understanding. But there were voices - people like Amos and Micah - who questioned if performing the ritual really brought us into relationship with God. *What does the Lord require of us,* they asked, *but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in the presence of God.* I believe that Jesus of Nazareth stood in that tradition, in that stream of Jewish faith that believed that the worship of God was centered in an orientation of one's life. *What is the greatest commandment? Love God. And there is a second of equal importance. Love your neighbor.* When Jesus drove the

animal sellers and money changers from the temple, I think that everyone who witnessed that event would have understood, in that moment, what it meant. Jesus was making a dramatic statement - a sermon in action - about what it meant to be a good Jew. They watched. And I think they understood.

But then, John says, a conversation took place that would not be understood until much later. Jesus was asked: *What sign can you show us that justifies this action?* He replies: *Tear this temple down and I will rebuild it in three days.* I can see the smirks, hear the laughter. *We've been building this temple for forty-six years and it is still not finished. Three days?* And then John teaches us something absolutely essential about faith. *But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.* In other words, when he told them about the sign that would confirm his understanding of the way God should be worshiped, they didn't understand. How could they? They didn't know how his life, his ministry, would unfold. It was only after Good Friday, after Easter morning, that talk of the temple rebuilt in three days could make any sense. John says, *He was talking about his body.*

John believes, and I believe that he is right, that everything Jesus said and did can only be fully understood when seen and heard through the lens of resurrection faith. Why is Jesus' way of life better than any other way? Why is his understanding of the way that God desires to be worshiped closer to truth? It was only after Easter that those who followed could really understand. His way gives life. All throughout John's gospel... life... life... life. *Unless a person is born from above....* New life. *I am come that you might have life, and have it in all its fullness.* Abundant life. *In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.* Life that brings light to the darkness of the world. John believes that following Jesus, trusting Jesus, being shaped by Jesus is life giving - but no one could quite grasp that until Easter morning. That, I think, is what John believes.

I also believe that sometimes it is hard to see where and how God is at work in the present moment. Life gets complicated. Situations get all tangled up. Sometimes and oftentimes, those forces seem to be life denying, life diminishing, seem to have the upper hand. And so, sometimes it is only in retrospect, as we look back on situations that in the moment were confusing and frightening, can we say: *I could not see it then, but now I see, God was present with me then.* I remember a conversation with the search committee that called me to be your minister. I must have made some comment about needing to discern God's will for Central and my life, because Phil asked me, *How do you know what the will of God is?* I said, *More often than not, I find it easier to determine God's will by looking in the rear view mirror of my life than it is by looking ahead through the windshield.*

*After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word he had spoken.* If, in the moment, you cannot understand... if, in the moment, you cannot believe... wait. Sometimes things to come will make all the difference.