

Third Sunday in Lent “Broken Windows”

Ex 20:1-17; Ps 19; 1 Cor 1:18-25; Jn 2:13-22

Like many churches, we have some lovely stained-glass windows here at St. Thomas, especially our beautiful Tiffany window. These windows are not just decorative architectural elements or glorious memorials to beloved former members. Most stained-glass windows depict important biblical stories or theological concepts. Yet, despite the countless churches in which I have worshipped, I have never seen a stained-glass window depicting today's gospel reading. No colored glass encased in lead portraying Jesus wreaking holy havoc in the Temple and turning things upside down. Maybe that's because we prefer the portrayal of a meek and mild Savior. After all, that image of Jesus is far less threatening to church folks than a Jesus who dares to speak-out and disrupt business as usual.

Last Sunday we heard Jesus telling people to take up their Cross if they wanted to be his disciples. Today we are presented with another hard reality of discipleship: what it means to be the Church. While it is unlikely that we will ever see Jesus involved in a confrontation at the local church bazaar, today's gospel challenges the Church's complicity of silence in light of the misuse of God's house and abuse of God's people.

That day there was a lot of selling and trading going on in the Temple courts. It was, as retailers might say, “the busy season.” Passover was near and Jews throughout the Roman Empire were heading toward Jerusalem to fulfill their annual obligation. [*Deut 16:16*] Jesus likewise made his way to the Temple to worship. By all accounts, the Temple was one of the great wonders of the world and glorious to behold. Rebuilt by Herod the Great, it was as much a testament to his enormous ego as it was a political ploy to win the favor of his disgruntled Jewish subjects. Even so, the Temple remained the only place to sacrifice and therefore worship God fully. It was the most sacred place on earth for Jews.

However, Jesus found little sacredness upon entering the Temple precincts. The outer court of the Temple, where secular money was exchanged and sacrificial animals bought and sold, looked more like the New York Stock Exchange than a place where people could find God. This misuse of consecrated space angered Jesus, just as it angered the ancient prophets before him. However, Jesus' anger was not merely a matter of disrespecting sacred ground. The religious leaders of Jesus' day still fervently believed the Temple to be a holy place. Under Roman dominion they worked under very difficult circumstances, all while trying to keep the peace, the doors open, and the Temple operating. However, in the name of maintaining a revered institution, the Temple's leaders turned a blind eye to the persecution and abuse happening within its own corridors and, perhaps more importantly, within themselves.

Even with the best of intentions, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God's house belongs to us and not the other way around. Whenever the institutional Church becomes more important than its mission, churches devolve into little more than temples to the human ego. That is also, when its leaders are tempted to turn a blind eye to injustice; a human trait that has not diminished despite 2,000 years of Christianity.

As a military child living in Maine, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Florida during the contested racial segregation of the 1950's and 60's, I can attest to how social conditioning and peer pressure silenced otherwise good people into thinking that it was more important to keep the peace than to take a public stand against hatred and injustice. Even as a child, I recognized the polite institutional silence of racism and the difference between fervently segregated schools in the South versus the desegregating schools in the North. That institutional silence in the face of injustice was the central theme behind The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* to the collective churches. It was a condemnation of the churches' silence in the face of the rampant persecution, abuse, and hatred of that era. King's righteous anger was a reflection of the true corruption of consecrated space not only within the churches but also in the church leaders.

Likewise, Jesus' righteous anger that day and his emphatic point was that the Temple leaders must speak out with unwavering clarity against any institutional silence or abuse, spiritual or otherwise, that is directed toward any of God's children. Such actions are the truest misuse of consecrated space. It is never, ever permissible to use scripture to justify hatred or to use the Church as an instrument of persecution of God's children.

When he was challenged, Jesus responded to his adversaries by saying that God's Temple could not be destroyed. And do you know why? It is because you, each of you, is God's "temple." You are a temple created out of love and you cannot destroy love. Institutions rise and fall all the time, but God's love does not perish. As Jesus' disciples, all of us, even other Christians with whom we disagree have been incorporated into the Body of Christ through baptism. That means that all of us are called to be disciples of love through whom God's presence is made known to the world. If Paul was correct that our bodies are temples, then in Christ we are God's little temples in this world. We exist to glorify God by embodying the same love that God has shown to us in Jesus Christ. We can sacrifice time, talent, and treasure all day long in the courts of the Lord, but unless we love and speak-out against hatred and injustice, then we too are guilty of misusing consecrated space. And when that happens.....*Lord, have mercy upon us.*

***“Although their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all lands,
and their message to the ends of the world.” Ps 19:3b-4***

What are the implications and meanings for you in today's readings?

1. Imagine if you had been present that day in the Temple. You have traveled days, weeks, perhaps even months to arrive in time for holy Passover and the Feast of Weeks. The Temple complex is huge and overwhelming; the throngs of people from throughout the Empire crushing. This is a holy time for you.
 - a. How do you think you would react to being cheated by Temple authorities that required you to “exchange” your money for theirs at a usurious rate?
 - b. How would you feel if those leaders insisted that the flawless animal you so carefully raised and brought for Temple sacrifice was “unfit” and you had to turn in your animal and buy theirs instead?
 - c. Imagine how the common baseness of the institutional Temple “business” might affect your sense of the sacredness of God and worship in God's holy house?
2. In his anger, Jesus quotes from Jewish scripture, the Old Testament, as justification for his actions.
 - a. How do you think you would have interpreted what Jesus was saying that day?
 - b. Would you have stayed with Jesus after what he did and said in the sacred Temple? Why or why not?
3. This biblical passage in John's Gospel is often referred to as: “*Jesus Cleanses the Temple.*”
 - a. What times in your life have you remained silent in the face of injustice or abuse?
 - b. What needs to be cleansed in your life now? What: regret, anger, resentment, frustration, etc.?

For the Biblical Scholars

- What is technically taking place in our *Exodus* passage between God and Moses?
- As Jesus overturns the tables and drives out merchants, he alludes to a portion of *Zechariah* [14:21c]. Read *Zechariah* 14: what is Jesus saying theologically about the situation and about himself?

- Why do you think Jesus quoted a portion of Psalm 69 [69:9]? Based on the entirety of that Psalm, what do you think Jesus is saying to the religious leaders?