

Lent 3—Year B
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

What a scene we have today from **John's** gospel. We aren't even halfway through **chapter 2**, and **Jesus** is in hot water. **He's traveled up to Jerusalem for the Passover.** The **temple** is THE place to be for this festival, but when he gets to the **temple, he finds people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drives all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle, and one presumes all those trading them. And he pours out the coins of the money changers and overturns their tables. And he tells those who are selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"**

Words just don't do justice to this scene. I mean, the scripture that comes to the **disciples'** minds as they witness it is that **psalm** that says, "**Zeal for your house will consume me.**" *Zeal* the noun comes from *zeal* the verb and it means "**to boil with heat, to boil with anger or love,**" or **both. Jesus is red hot mad.** The thought that **his Father's house**, God's house, would become a **trading floor**, a place where human beings and animals were made into *commodities*, a place where human beings got *reduced to financial transactions*—oooooh.

Let's be clear, **the buying and selling of animals for sacrifice**, the *sacrificial economy* was **the center of Jerusalem's economy**, and *it was too big to fail*.

And the fact that **Jesus** singles out the **dove sellers** is especially important—because **the dove sellers were trading in on the poor.** It was **the poor, and especially women who couldn't afford the grander animals for sacrifice who bought the doves to make their offerings in the temple.** And to **pay your temple tax**, you had to use a **special coinage**, so you *had to interact with this economy* if you wanted to fulfill your religious obligation.

All of this makes Jesus boil. And so, he **makes that whip**, and he **drives them out and pours out all the coins of the money changers**, and he **throws over their tables.** He *completely interrupts the flow of trade; he brings the business of the temple to a grinding stop.* What is another word that we use to describe such activity? (pause) That's right, **civil disobedience.** *Jesus is the patron saint of civil disobedience. Conscious acts done to draw attention to the fact that something is really, really wrong. And draw attention he did.*

In the other **three gospels**, this act is done in **the last week of his life**, placed squarely in *Holy Week*, and it's thought that this act was one of the pieces *that led to his arrest.* So, this act of *civil disobedience* is the *culmination of his prophetic ministry.*

But this is **John's gospel**, and it's **chapter 2**—there's a long, long way to go before **Jesus** will be **arrested.** In **John's gospel**, this is **Jesus' first really public act.** All he's done so far is to **call his disciples and make some really good wine at a wedding in Cana way up in Galilee.**

So, *choosing this as his first really public act*, oh wow, *Jesus is setting the tone for his whole ministry*.

He's *signaling from the get-go what really matters to him, what's important*. Jesus is making crystal clear that, **where God is concerned, people come first**.

And when people **come to a house to worship and pray and bring the burdens on their hearts, their sins**, when people come to that place where tradition tells them God dwells richly, when people come to that place where they are seeking to deepen that relationship with God, when people come to *that place bringing their hopes for renewal*, and *then, you reduce them to an economic transaction, that is way not okay*.

And, it's even bigger than that—*Jesus is calling attention to the fact that this whole economic structure that exploits the poor and the women and the bloody brutality of the whole endeavor—it makes a mockery out of the right relationships that God intends*. This isn't *just* about *individual* bad actors, *individual* traders and money-changers who were *greedy*, **this is about the whole daggone system that has turned people into commodities and erased all memory that we are more than our productivity and economic value; we are made to be in relationship with one another and with the rest of creation**.

But oh my goodness, does *this act ever create havoc with the powers-that-be*. **The leaders wanted to know, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"** And Jesus went a step *further* than **throwing over a few tables; he went for the heart of the matter—"Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up."** "*What?!?*," the leaders replied, **"This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?"** But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body.

Jesus is reminding them, and us, *it's not about our grand projects*, especially when we lose the forest for the trees and *forget the people being crushed to bring those grand projects to completion—it's about the fact that every single human being is a temple of God* because every single human being is a place where God has *pitched God's tent*, to use the language of John 1; every single human is a place where God has *taken up residence and planted the divine presence*; every single human being is a *locus of holiness*. That's what God has been trying to tell us since the very beginning—**how we relate to God is *inextricably bound up with* how we are in relationship with one another**.

And that springs us back to **Exodus** where God first gave God's people the **10 Best Ways to Live**, as *Godly Play* calls it. The **first three commandments** all deal with *our relationship with God*.

- *"I'm the Lord your God; I brought you up out of slavery; you don't get to put yourself back into slavery by putting some other god in front of me."*
- *"And it's a slippery slope—that includes idols. You don't get to make for yourself an idol because you'll start worshipping that thing and begin to think that that's your god."*
- *"And words matter because words shape perspective and imagination and that shapes belief and that shapes action, so don't be making wrongful use of my name, and that*

includes speaking in my name in ways that diminish any of those in whom I have breathed my breath.”

The last six commandments all deal with *our relationships with those other human beings in whom God is pleased to dwell.*

- *“Honor your father and mother. Remember, you don’t ever stand all on your own, but you are connected in a great web of humanity that stretches back and will go far beyond you.”*
- *“All life is sacred; you don’t get to take it.”*
- *“All relationships are sacred, especially as that’s expressed in the most intimate of relationships. Breaking these sacred covenants sows a world of pain and brokenness, and covenant matters to me. When you’re living in relationship with me, don’t make a mockery of these intimate sacred covenants. That’s not how we roll.”*
- *“And I feel just as strongly about stealing from others; that’s breaking relationship with one another—that’s off the table.”*
- *“And bearing false witness against your neighbor—again, breaking relationship with your neighbor—not okay.”*
- *“And coveting—oh, that leads you into a world of hurt—don’t covet your neighbor’s house, or wife, or slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. It only lands you into the world of comparison, and that will leave you deeply dissatisfied with all that I’ve given you. I am enough. Period.”*

And in between the **first three commandments** and the last six commandments is the **fourth commandment** which reminds us that *how we relate to God can never be severed from how we relate to one another.*

- *“Remember the sabbath day; keep it holy. Six days you work, but on the seventh, you rest to remember that I am the Creator, not you; to remember that you are more than what you produce; to remember that you bear my divine breath; and you are extend this holy rest, this respite from work, to everyone in your orbit; to remember that all other human beings, indeed all of creation itself bears my life and breath. Got it? I’m God, not you. And though you’re not God, you are precious in my sight. So, remember the sabbath; remember that this day is holy; this day is consecrated—and so are you.”*

This is the **tradition** that **shapes Jesus**; this is the frame through which he had learned to view **God and neighbor**; this is **religion at its best**, and so, to *see it go completely off the rails and to see that very religious tradition used as a tool to exploit those whom God loved, it was just more than he could take.*

Is it more than we can take? When we witness **exploitation**, when we see **people profess to be in relationship with God** and refuse to see all the ways that we have broken relationship with one another; when we see all structures that have reduced human worth and dignity and value to a dollar sign, when we see how far the whole enterprise has gone off the rails, *do we boil with anger, do we burn with love for God’s people and God’s creation?*

Can we see all the places where *we* have lost our way chasing after other gods and idols of our own making?

Can we **admit those places where we might have spoken in God's name, convinced that our perspective is surely the way God sees it, and see that our very speaking breaks relationship with another human being equally beloved in God's sight?**

Can we **admit that our own temple**, be that *the temple we worship in communally, together, here, or the temple of our own soul* might be **in need of some cleansing?**

Can we grasp that **Jesus might want to mount an act of civil disobedience in our presence to wake us up to all the ways that we have fallen short of the glory of the kingdom of God?**

If we **clear out the barriers, if we get rid of all the stuff in the way; if we rethink all the structures that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God**, to use the language of our *baptismal renunciations*, **what might we discover in God, in ourselves, in one another?**

Any *illusion* we had of **Lent** being a *nice, introspective, quite private and personal* season of *reflection*, any *illusion* we had of being able to have a *personal reckoning* with our *private sins*, well, **Jesus has thrown that table over this morning and driven that illusion out, along with the sheep and the cattle and the traders. No, there is no going deep with God without examining all of our relationships with our fellow human beings, those who are intimately close and those who live on the other side of the world and all the structures that mediate all these relationships.**

Chaotic, and even scary as it is, **let Jesus have his way today. Let him grab our attention and throw over some tables and completely reorient us to what truly matters—God and one another; God and neighbor—it really is that simple. Anything that diminishes that—we need to be joining Jesus and letting his zeal consume us, cost us what it might. Amen.**

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
March 4, 2018