

March 7, 2021 Lent 3B

John 2:13-22

Spring Cleaning

We want to get to what's going on with Jesus in the temple in today's Gospel reading, and I want you to think about the way the temple is talked about in 1 Cor. 3:16: *"Do you not know that you are God's **temple** and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"*

But let's start with the Old Testament lesson--the list of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20:1-17. This text is familiar to you, I am sure. It is a list of dos and don'ts: Do have no other God's. Do Honor your father and mother. Don't steal. Don't lie or kill. Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear a list of commandments, I immediately feel guilty. Simultaneously as the list of the commandments is being read, I am making a list of all the times I have violated the commandments.

The list of the Ten Commandments is, of course, the ultimate list of do's and don'ts. Hearing it is enough to send me into a real guilt funk; but when, in the middle of the list, I hear God say: I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments, then my guilt turns to fear and I wonder which side of God am I on? I know I love God, but I also know I have not kept the commandments. Will God punish my children and my children's children for my sins?

When one of my kids was in kindergarten, the teacher used a "stop and think about it" chair. If you got in trouble you had to spend some time in the "stop and think about it" chair, thinking about what got you there.

The "stop-and-think-about-it" chair is where the Ten Commandments send me. The "stop-and-think-about-it" chair is the place where you have a chance to think about your sin and guilt, and there is nothing like your father standing there with a disappointed and angry look on his face to focus your mind. So thoughts from the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair are thoughts about sin and guilt and punishment-and an angry God.

One question that is always good to ask yourself in the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair is, "Why am I here?" These days I feel as if the whole nation needs some time in the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair. "How did we get here?" How did we get to be this place of greed and injustice and violence and hate?

We really do need to be brought to a renewed realization that it is definitely we who are in the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair, that we are all in this together. "We are all in this together." We have said that about a number of things the past year. It applies to the "stop and think about it" chair as well. We have come to realize that when a person is murdered, it affects us all. We have come to realize that when one person gets sick, it affects us all. We have come to realize that when one person's rights are violated, it affects us all. We don't even need to wait for the third and the fourth generation for the visitation of our iniquities. They are bearing down on us like a freight train.

What is it that the Michael Douglas character named Gordon Gecko declared in the movie "Wall Street" that was so popular in the 90's, "Greed is good?" Yeah--well we see how far that has gotten us.

Sitting here in the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair waiting for the rest of the punishment to be visited on us--oh I know there is more to come--I wonder what did I do to bring about this situation. How did I buy into this culture of anything goes? How did I begin to believe that "greed is good?" And as I sit here contemplating the mess we are in, I am brought to the foot of the Cross on Good Friday, and I find myself remembering the words of Jesus, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He was talking about us too.

Who was the guilty? In the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair you don't get to point fingers even when we sit in there together. It would be so easy to do this in this dire situation we're in, saying it was those NRA, Liberals, conservatives, politicians, crooked mortgage brokers. And in the end the answer to "Who was the 'them' Jesus was asking to be forgiven" is again we are the guilty, we bought into the culture of me-first anything goes, both literally and figuratively.

We are not used to facing our guilt. In the culture that refuses to make hard choices, the last thing anyone wants to take is responsibility. We want it all--except responsibility. Guilt is way out of fashion. Guilt is a useless emotion, a waste of energy. When the goal is how can I get more and more for me and mine, guilt gets in the way of progress.

In the era of me-first, we did our best to forget that God can get angry. We did our best to look away when God's face became the least bit clouded and preached with all our might that God is love. Well God is love and loves us enough to get angry with us when we are bent toward self-destruction. God is love and loves us enough to say that we will end up bankrupt if we co-opt everything for our own consumption, if every system is designed to enrich us. We will end up devastated if our world is built on having more and more--consuming more and more--using more and more. God does not even have to punish us. The natural consequences of unsustainable greed will do the

punishing, and those consequences are being visited upon us and will be visited upon the third and fourth generation: poverty, homelessness, unemployment, restricted lending practices, deficits in the trillions, the destruction of our environment and war.

We are not used to an angry God; but sitting in the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair, we are forced to face God's anger squarely. We do not like to think about an angry God, so when we hear in our Gospel lesson for today that Jesus got angry enough to push some people around we don't know quite what to think.

What fueled Jesus anger as He burst into the temple upsetting the piles of money sitting on the moneychangers table--what made Jesus just hopping mad--was that we have the audacity to co-opt for our own gain the very means God had provided for our atonement. You see, in Jesus' day you atoned for your sin, you were made right with God by sacrificing an animal at the altar of the temple in the presence of a priest. To sacrifice an animal at the altar was the most holy and intimate act a person could do in relation to God. And they turned this holy and precious act into an opportunity to make a fast buck. The real temple was not where they came to make things right with God; the real temple was where the money was exchanged, for they did not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They worship the almighty dollar and the power it can bring.

Jesus had to tear down this temple. Jesus had to upset this system that put the forgiveness of sins at the service of making money. Jesus said, "Tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in three days." Now John clues us into the temple that Jesus would rebuild but cleverly leaves to our imagination the temple He is destroying. The temple Jesus would rebuild in three days is the temple of his body. The temple He was destroying? Was it the temple of stones or the temple of greed and injustice? Was it the temple that served God or the temple that demanded that everything serve our self-interest? Was it the temple that was the footstool of God--the center of the universe or the temple that put making money at the center of the universe? Was it the temple in which every knee bowed to the Almighty or the temple that made even God's gift of the forgiveness of sins bow down in service to the almighty dollar?

Jesus came to not just destroy the temples we build to serve ourselves but to raise up a new temple for us, a temple in which we can truly be reconciled to God. Every temple made with human hands, every system we attempt to construct, will end up only serving ourselves. In Jesus, God offers us a temple where we can receive the forgiveness of sin without cost, where we can be reconciled to God without trying to make a buck, where we can worship the one true God and be free from our bondage to greed and self-service. In our

baptism, we enter this temple, becoming one with the body of Christ, living in the temple of God's love and forgiveness forever.

In the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair some things have become clear. God is a jealous God, jealous for our own good. God wants us to serve God alone, not serve ourselves. God wants us to worship God alone, not worship the almighty dollar. God wants us to dwell in the temple of his love and forgiveness, not to be banished to the "stop-and-think-about-it" chair. Jesus invites us out of the woodshed, out of our abode of sin and guilt, to abide with him in the temple of His body which he offers for us on the cross, a body to which we are joined in our baptism, a body in which we, by the grace of God, will dwell forever. AMEN.