3/8/15 Mr. Clean A Lenten Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett

THE GOSPEL WITNESS John 2:13-22

This is the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, a story that appears in all four Gospels. In the time of Jesus, animals were bought and sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem as an offering to God. This was an ancient and accepted practice. People came to the Temple from many other countries, and in order to purchase the sacrificial animals and pay a required Temple offering, foreign money needed to be changed into Tyrian silver coins called shekels. The moneychangers took a fee for each transaction, which the people complained about.

The selling of animals and the changing of money in the Temple courtyard angers Jesus. Jesus tells the animal sellers and moneychangers, “Take these things out of here. Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.” In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus adds, “It is written that my house should be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.”

SERMON

The story of Jesus cleansing the temple is an important one for the plotting of the gospel narrative of Jesus’ life and death. The story is also important for showing us Jesus’ passion for doing God’s will.

The importance of the cleansing of the temple for the plot of gospel narratives is shown by its placement in the four gospels.

In the Gospel of John the cleansing story occurs almost immediately, in the second chapter, right after Jesus called four of his disciples and turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The temple cleansing story’s prominent placement indicates to me that this is an important story about the early ministry of Jesus, helping to define his character.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the “synoptic gospels” because they are more similar to each other than similar to the Gospel of John. In the synoptic gospels, the story of Jesus Cleansing the Temple takes place near the end of each Gospel, near the close of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Depending on the gospel, the Temple Cleansing takes place on Palm Sunday or the day after Palm Sunday at the start of what we now call Holy Week.

The dramatic scene at the Temple foreshadows the Passion of Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane, the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. Jesus’ dramatic actions at the temple prove to some people that Jesus is a charismatic, blasphemous troublemaker who needs to be stopped. On the other hand, Jesus' followers are in awe of him.

And so we can see that the Cleansing of the Temple is a critical event in the narrative of Jesus’ life and death.

The Cleansing of the Temple is also important because it shows us another side, a different side of our Lord. It shows us his humanity. We may be more used to thinking of Jesus in terms of his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus turning the other cheek, Jesus being understanding, Jesus going the second mile, and Jesus forgiving seventy-times-seven times. Some of paintings and treasured hymns of the Church portray Jesus as passive, as meek and mild.

Yet the Jesus we see in the Cleansing of the Temple is hardly meek and mild, hardly understanding, hardly forgiving. He does not turn the other cheek. He is anything but passive. Jesus at the Temple is outraged, outraged at what he sees --- people demeaning the House of the Lord, which instead of being a sacred house of prayer for all nations, has become a marketplace and banking hall.

Jesus is so angry that he not only tells the offenders to get out, Jesus drives them and their animals out, using a “whip of cords” according to the Gospel of John. To add insult to injury, Jesus pours the coins of the moneychangers onto the floor and overturns their tables. He may have thought that the animal sellers and moneychangers were blaspheming God and the first three of God’s Ten Commandments: Have no other Gods before me. Make no idols. Do not take the Lord God’s name in vain.

In the Cleansing of the Temple we see Jesus turn from the Gentle Shepherd to Mr. Clean, and an unsmiling Mr. Clean at that.

 “Mr. Clean gets rid of dirt and grime and grease in just a minute.

 Mr. Clean will clean his Father’s house, and everything that’s in it.”

And I think it’s important to have both images of Jesus in mind during this Holy Season of Lent: Jesus our Good Shepherd, knowing and caring about us and our neighbors, and Jesus as Mr. Clean, speaking and acting passionately (and yes, even angrily) when he finds something that goes against his summary of the Ten Commandments to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Jesus and the entire Biblical tradition would have us stand up and support our neighbor, particularly the neediest: the widow and the orphan, the hungry and the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned. Jesus and the entire Biblical tradition would have us stand up passionately so that “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” as the prophet Amos and later Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently proclaimed.

From some of Jesus’ teachings, like turn the other cheek, we might perceive Jesus as passive. But Jesus is anything but passive. He believes in the power of love, but the transformational power of love, not the easy love of the status quo, the easy love of letting injustice go on and on.

By Cleansing the Temple, Jesus shows us that anger can be good, if put to good use, if the anger is righteous anger, rather than self-righteous anger, righteous anger due to God’s will being thwarted, rather than self-righteous anger, due to our own will being thwarted.

Jews have a term Righteous Among the Nations, which is an [honorific](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honorific) used by the [State of Israel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel) to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the [Holocaust](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocaust) to save [Jews](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews) from extermination by the [Nazis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi_Germany). These people are sometimes also called Righteous Gentiles.

Two righteous men who come to mind are Oskar Schindler of the film, “Schindler’s List.” Schindler helped to save thousands of Polish Jews by shielding them as workers in his factories.

Refering to them as his “Schindlerjuden,” Schindler ensured that the Jews in his factories worked but were also fed, no-one was beaten, and no-one was killed. Each factory became an oasis of humanity in a desert of moral apathy.

Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who helped save thousands of [Hungarian Jews](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Hungarytoc.html). Wallenberg provided Jews with special Swedish passports and also set up a bureaucracy in [Budapest](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Budapest.html) designed to protect Jews by using "safe houses" where they could receive food and medical supplies.

More than 90,000 Budapest Jews were deported to death camps; Wallenberg's efforts may have saved an equal number. Following the liberation of Budapest, Wallenberg was arrested by the Soviets and was never heard from again.

When [Hitler](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) and his [Nazis](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/nazipartytoc.html) built the [Warsaw Ghetto](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/warsawtoc.html) and herded 500,000 [Polish Jews](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/polandtoc.html) behind its walls to await liquidation, many Polish gentiles turned their backs or applauded. Not [Irena Sendler](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/irenasendler.html). An unfamiliar name to most people, this remarkable woman defied the Nazis and saved 2,500 Jewish children by smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto. As a health worker, she sneaked the children out between 1942 and 1943 to safe hiding places and found non-Jewish families to adopt them.

These righteous men and women were angry about what they saw, and they risked their lives and the lives of their families for the love of people they knew as their neighbors.

We may have a feeling that it isn’t Christian to be angry. But it is probably as true, or it’s even more true, that it isn’t Christian to be quiet, to be nice and quiet in the midst of injustice.

As we live our lives, it’s normal to be angry. We may be angry at some point every day, and that’s ok. But it is important to check out what it is that’s making us angry. We can be glad about expressing righteous anger for the common good, while reigning in self-righteous anger for our own gain.

Anger can clear the air and bring about positive change, especially if we have ideas about how to make the situation that angered us better. Jesus’ anger cleared the air. He had plenty of ideas about how to make life better. And rather than sacrificing animals, Jesus became the sacrifice, for us. The cross didn’t make Jesus angry, but it did make him sad. He prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

So during this Lenten period, let us remember the love of our Lord, but also his anger, knowing that Jesus gives us the authority to be righteously angry too, angry for the love of God and the love of our neighbor.

Amen.

HYMN OF RESPONSE

In last Sunday’s sermon, entitled “Growing in Gratitude,” I suggested that during Lent we think once a day or once a week of what we are grateful for at that moment in time. I also suggested that we express our appreciation to God, another person, or to the leader of a cultural institution that has blessed our lives.

To help us keep a focus on gratitude during Lent, the Hymns of Response to the sermons will be hymns of gratitude, hymns that are most commonly sung at Thanksgiving, but can well be sung all year.

The Hymn of Response for today is Hymn 553, “For the Fruit of All Creation.”