

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, March 8, 2015

Exodus 20: 1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 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.

Let us pray...Amen.

Why do you think it is that human-kind always finds a way to twist or manipulate the very institutions they create to serve humanity? Or twist even sacred institutions, if it suits our purpose. Here's a list of a few that have been coopted into dysfunction: Government, Higher Education, Economic Institutions, Medical Institutions, Social Welfare Institutions, Religious Institutions.

Religious Institutions. Not a new concept is it? Our Hebrew Scripture this morning retells the story of God giving Moses the 10 Commandments. *The* 10 Commandments. The commandments around which the Judeo-Christian faiths have built their religious institutions. And for all their profound impact on shaping both the Jewish faith and the Christian faith, and in spite of their centrality to our relationship with our God, can anyone here today raise their hand and say they've followed and obeyed every single one of these commandments faithfully their entire lives? Can anyone here or out there say that they've kept the commandments just as God intended for us to keep them?

Of course not. We're human. We break rules. And promises. We're not perfect. We weren't meant to be.

Now Jesus, he's another story. *He* was meant to be perfect. Perfectly human and perfectly divine. And in our Gospel lesson this morning, he gets mad. Really mad. Mad enough to physically drive out the animals and the people who are twisting and manipulating the church and its rituals for their own purpose.

Here's how it happened. Herod had an idea. A grand, colossal idea. He wanted to rebuild the temple, the one that had been torn down 70 years before when the Babylonians held Israel in captivity. Not because it would

honor God, not because it would serve as a place for the faithful to worship God, though those would be a bonus, for sure. Herod's plan to rebuild the temple into a grand and massive building was an act based on pure ego. He did it as a way to make his mark on the world. In honor of himself.

So while the community took to the temple as a replacement for the first one, built by Solomon, it was already fundamentally different.

Part of the Jewish ritual is sacrifice. When a family needed to make a sacrifice, it was with a cow, a sheep or goat, or dove. Families that could afford a cow did so. Families that had little or no money sacrificed a dove.

A whole cottage industry grew up around Jewish families, and their needs to buy animals for their sacrifices. Sellers of cows, sheep and doves congregated around the temple, eventually setting up stalls and tables in order to conduct business.

Greek and Roman money was not kosher. The only money that could be used to buy the animals for ritual sacrifice was Jewish money...Roman and Greek money needed to be exchanged for Jewish money so that the transaction could be considered appropriate.

When Jesus arrived at the temple, he lost his temper. He saw the money changers and the animal traders as perverting the sacred process of sacrifice at the temple. And he was right. Humanity had manipulated the institution of the church for its own gain. From Herod to the last money changer to be driven out of the temple, they had twisted the meaning behind the tradition.

Jesus, perfectly human and perfectly divine became violent, and very likely broke laws when he drove out the sellers and the money changers. Our Lord and Savior was a civil disobedient.

His father's house, God's house, had become a marketplace, a place of profit, not a place of justice. But in the name of fighting injustice, Jesus acted, physically whipped the animals and the people, physically overturned tables and poured out bags of money in order to make a point.

Now, as an aside, the other three gospels put this story near the end of Jesus' ministry, so that this act of civil disobedience is seen as one of the things that lead to his arrest.

John places this story in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, meaning that he sets Jesus up to be a civil disobedient right from the start. I find that interesting. In 3 gospels, Jesus matures into his civil disobedience, over the course of time, and in one, he starts out that way. Ultimately, does it make a difference? I'm not sure. But this I know: Jesus believed that in order to fight injustice, one had to act. This is as much a path to following Jesus as is forgiving, or loving one's neighbor. This concept of faith practice is as important as loving God, and attempting to follow the 10 Commandments.

But it's the one we're least comfortable following, isn't it? It's hard to watch the institutions of government, education, medicine, economics, welfare and religion fail some of our sisters and brothers because they have been twisted and manipulated into serving only a fraction of humanity. We're not too keen on overturning the tables and pouring out the money and driving the sellers out of the temple when it comes to these institutions and the injustices they visit upon our neighbors.

In the gospel according to John, this galvanizing moment occurs before the healings, before the walking on water, before the loaves and fishes, before the raising of Lazarus, before the new commandment for us to love one another. And I think that means something. It meant something for the people for whom John was writing, and two millennia later, it means something to us.

Part of the path to following Jesus includes fighting injustice. Fighting injustice *as Jesus would define it*. Now, I don't have to list them for you, you can make your own list of institutions that have been perverted to serve only a few instead of the many.

In fact, it's important that you *do* make your own list, because you can't fight an injustice if you don't feel passion for it, or if you don't see it as an injustice.

Jesus felt an overwhelming passion to fight the injustices occurring at the temple. That house of God had been turned into a marketplace that turned a profit for a few at the expense of the many. And it was too much for Jesus. So he drove them out, with physical force and obvious anger.

There is an important place in our faith, and in our world, for civil disobedience. It raises awareness of injustice, it requires sacrifice for our beliefs, and, when done right, can reverse the course of an institution that has become twisted and off-track.

And most of us here today won't feel comfortable engaging in it. Too risky. The consequences are too scary. So maybe the first step is to just identify the places where injustice occurs. Maybe if we look around with this new lens, this lens of passion for justice, we will see the places where injustice reigns.

When I first started seminary, a NY Conference staff person invited me to have coffee during a retreat. He told me that for much of history, the institution of the American church had been on the forefront of battling injustice. Fighting against slavery, fighting for the rights of women to vote, advocating for the protection of children, protections for people at work. He told me he was worried that the church had lost its position on the front lines of the battle, and instead, had retreated to the rear, where it could

observe without fear, without worry. He said the institution of the church was no longer relevant in fighting injustice. Oh, certain individuals, certain churches, but the church as a whole had lost its taste for civil disobedience, lost its passion for justice, and instead had put its energy into maintaining the status quo, maintaining whatever power it had accrued.

Was he right? If we look at our own faith practice, and if it does not include some kind of passionate advocacy for justice, some kind of action against injustice, then, yes, he was right.

I invite you to make a private list of the ways injustice injures some of our brothers and sisters. Not a list of the tables you would be willing to overturn, just a list of places where you see injustice.

If we do that, we can't help but be sensitized to the victims of injustice, and perhaps a small seed will be planted in the field of our faith practice, where we might begin acting for justice, and against injustice.

I heard a wonderful definition of justice from a colleague of mine, and I will leave it with you as you make your list of places where injustice flourishes: justice is when everybody has everything that they need. Not everything that they want, but everything that they need. At the very least, we know places in the world where most have what they need, and we know places in the world where most don't have what they need. Justice is when everybody has what they need.

The righteous indignation that Jesus felt, the passion that drove him to act this way is a perfectly human emotion, and the author of the gospel of John felt it was important enough to put in the beginning of the story. If we're passionate enough for pursuing justice, if it's important enough for some of us, we just might turn over a table or two ourselves. Amen.