

Lent IIIB, Mid-point of the Lenten Journey

Lections: Exodus 20:1-17; Ps. 19; I Corinthians 1: 18-25; John 2:13-22

He was impatient, waiting for the arrival of the priest. He offered to help hang some curtains, complained that he had children to feed but would not accept the offer of food gathered at the community's worship. He had come for money and wanted more than the check offered from the meager discretionary account. Within 48 hours he was back, wanting more money or a job that would pay him. I had no more money to give and no job either. He wanted the church to be his bank or at least a free marketplace where he could gather enough to continue his habits. I found myself getting angry at the presumptions and I was inclined to ask him to leave. The church functioned as a tourist destination not a true sanctuary for spiritual pilgrims and it set me to wondering about the church and economic systems.

Jesus was angry too but his anger was directed at a system that had made access to God dependent upon economic circumstances. The money changers were there to provide currency exchange so that the temple tax could be paid in temple coinage before worship at the festival. Those who sold animals for religious sacrifices were helping people meet their religious obligations. Those who maintained the temple had a holiness code and spent their time with rules and practices to keep worship clean and undefiled by those who were not acceptable. Jesus believed that the temple as sacred space had a purpose as a house of prayer for all people without manipulation or exploitation. The temple practices had been offered to help people meet their religious obligations but the practices had become corrupt and mitigated against the poor. But what are religious obligations?

The lessons from scripture invite us to think about these things, considering our priorities, our core values, the deepest places from which we orient our lives. We read the Shema; the Exodus reading re-presents the obligation of law and practice in the 10 commandments. The psalm speaks about paying attention to the God of creation, to re-orientation and renewal of faith. The letter to the church in Corinth says this is wisdom which may not be acknowledged by the world at large. For me these lessons highlight our Lenten journey in terms of cleaning out our own temples, our places in the heart and in action which help prepare us for Easter.

The cleansing of the temple occurs in all four gospels so the community of faith's memory was that this was important. In the synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) this scene is remembered as occurring during the final week of Jesus' ministry. It was a tipping point for those who were determined to eliminate him. He had disrupted the religious system at its place of core practice. An attack on the religious authorities and the temple invites response. The high priest will pay Judas for his betrayal of Jesus; I wonder if the money came from the coins scattered. But in John's gospel the placement of this confrontation occurs early in Jesus' ministry, following the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee. There the water jars for purification, for cleansing, had been transformed into the wine of celebration for the new kingdom. The weight of Jesus' anger is equally provocative in all of the gospels but the telling of the story from the perspective of the Johannine community means we are invited to think in new ways.

In John's gospel Jesus offers himself as the new sacred space, the new temple in which there is no barrier to God. He is the place, the true sanctuary where all who are hungry or thirsty, all who seek prayer or healing, will be met without reserve. His body, his blood will become the new focus for worship. He is the sacrifice. It seems that the temple is not to be cleansed but destroyed, replaced in Jesus. That is how the community of faith at that time and place understood what happened. You will remember that the new followers of Jesus were being thrown out of the synagogues by the religious authorities. This change will mean that the followers of Jesus will be called to live in a new way. They will begin to meet their religious obligations by becoming his body.

Why not become bread? Why not become compassion, generosity? Why not become places of deep prayer and invitation to God? Why not become angry about barriers to fullness of life? Why not be those who examine the links of faith and worship with economic systems? Why not come to church to learn how to be the church?

One small way in which we act on our core values is in Fair Trade practices, recognizing that some of the economic systems in which we participate can have restorative or destructive power. Our diocesan synod passed a resolution in the fall asking that all parishes serve fair trade products in coffee and tea. Some complained that it was too expensive, but where is the true cost if not in the lives of those who work for low wages to provide those coffees and teas. Another way is to focus on the Millennium Development Goals meeting our religious obligations by serving others and not ourselves. The drum fest coming up after Easter and the U2charist will make a difference.

Around a quiet dinner table hopes and dreams for a new kingdom were spoken. A man with institutional power spoke humbly about his concerns and his individual actions on behalf of others. At mid point in his life's journey he is determined to leave a legacy of faith. He worships in another Anglican parish; I have asked him to share his journey with us in the Easter season. He is practicing resurrection, hoping that the church will remove its blinders and its barriers.

Stay tuned for the rising. And don't be surprised if the changes make things a little bumpy. Amen+

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera