

Sermon 3rd Sunday of Lent Year B March 11 2012

We hear a passage that is familiar to us in the gospel. Jesus comes into the temple and is angry, very angry...so much so that he assaults those in the Temple who are selling animals and changing money. We call this passage the cleansing of the Temple. To understand why this passage is so important to include in scripture we must stop and ask what was so important about the Temple and what Jesus was trying to convey.

It's difficult for us to grasp what the temple meant to the Jewish people. Those of us in churches love them, they provide us with a home in which to gather as the people of God, but the Temple in Jerusalem meant much more. To the Jews it was the actual place where God dwelt. In the center of the Temple—in the Holy of Holies—the Ark of the Covenant was set with the mercy seat on top on which God actually sat. And there, in the heart of the Temple complex, in the heart of the city which served as the spiritual and political heart of Israel...God lived among God's people.

The temple complex was a series of areas. The area in which the vendors were selling the animals and making change was called the court of the Gentiles...an outer courtyard where people of all faiths could enter the Temple area. Gentiles (the non-Jews) could enter the temple complex in the Court of the Gentiles. The inner areas, available only to Jews, were accessed through the Beautiful Gate that led into the Women's court and further in to the Men's Court, still further in the priests court near the sacrificial altar. The most sacred part of the temple the Holy of Holies was entered only by the High Priest and only on one day a year...Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

What creates a real difficulty is that Jesus acted against those who were given legal permits to sell their animals. Jesus drives out those who not only have a place inside the temple, but also offer a service to those who come to worship. These are, in other words, card-carrying insiders who have permits to help facilitate worship. Yet, they are thrown out, their things poured out, and their tables turned over. With God, we may always be surprised about who are the insiders and outsiders.

One of the realities of our human condition is that human beings have used purity laws and cleansing as a way to define those inside and those outside. It's actually more about maintaining power structures. We see this historically throughout scripture and in our churches, and our world today. To ancient Jews to imitate God was to *be holy as God is holy* which was understood as separation from everything that was unclean. The ethos of purity produced a politics of purity—a society structured around a purity system. For example, males were considered more pure than females because of menstruation. Childbirth and menstruation left women “impure.” Thus they could not enter the Temple unless made clean. After the menstruation or childbirth, women were required to take a full immersion ritual bath called a Mikvah in order to enter the temple.

This may sound strange to us, but we only have to look back to our own Episcopal tradition less than 50 years to the former prayer book. There was a ritual known as the Churching of Women that was a carry over from these ancient ideas of purity. It was to reintegrate women into the church after childbirth. While the prayers were of thanksgiving for her safety and the well-being

of her child, the rite was about her reintegration into the community. Today there is a short rite in our prayer book focused on the Thanksgiving for the birth of a child that invites both parents to give thanks for the child—not the Churching of Women.

Sacrifices were officially offered in the temple as a way to regain purity for those unclean. When Jesus was presented at the temple and Mary made ritually pure in the Mikvah, a sacrificial offering was also made.

I tell all of this to underscore the importance that the Temple had to the Jewish people, an importance that has repercussions today in the Middle East...but that's a topic for another day.

So if sacrifices were essential in Jewish rituals and Jesus was a devout Jew, what might he have been trying to teach the people through this violent act?

Jesus emphasizes no longer was the Temple the place where God lived, but he himself was the Temple. It is not buildings, but in the hearts of those who seek to live more fully God's ways.

I believe that this can't be overstated; *Jesus identifies himself as The Temple*. And, if we don't understand the theological significance of the Temple as THE place where the actual Presence of God Almighty dwells among His people, then we miss the theological significance of what Jesus is saying here.

Jesus is saying that *he's the place where the Presence of God dwells among His people*.

It's important to realize how this would have been heard by those hearing this in their own context.

As I've said, the Temple was THE place where God dwelled for the Jews. In 70AD, some 35 or so years after Jesus' death, the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the most devastating thing that had happened to the Jewish people since the exile in Babylon nearly 600 years prior. The people in Jerusalem and all of first century Palestine were still trying to figure out how to get along with a Temple.

When they heard John's Gospel however, they were comforted in that there was another Temple. And it was Jesus.

But, even when Jesus says these words some four decades prior to the destruction of the Temple, Jesus is telling his listeners God could be found through *him*. Not through a building. Not encased in stone and mortar. But, in *him*.

And, this is true for us today. As much as we love our church building, this is not the church. The church resides in the person of Jesus Christ, and in you and me. As members of the Body of Christ, we are invited to more fully discover the divine that resides in our hearts and call upon the Spirit of God to enliven us and help us become the people God has created us to be. Amen.