

Third Weekend in Lent (RCL/B): "Our Lord in the Temple: Righteous Anger vs. Wrath"
Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22
March 6-7, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I preached on this Gospel in 1994, the week after the conviction of those who bombed the Trade Towers the **first** time. That sermon began:

It didn't happen in Beirut or Belfast or Johannesburg. It happened in downtown Manhattan, "Gotham City," The Big Apple, USA. When a guilty verdict came down last week, we were reminded of the terrorists who planted a **very** large bomb in the parking garage beneath one of the Trade Towers. Remember the tales survivors told about having to walk down 50, 60, 70 stories, feeling their way in pitch-black stairwells? It was an event that shook many of us, even here in the Midwest. [I was serving at the time in Mundelein, a suburb due north of Chicago.] Our native land had been violated. Our "sacred" national space was trampled. That has frightened **and** angered us.

Very recently we've heard again about the desecration of civic sacred space. The Capitol has often been referred to on and since January 6 as "the temple of democracy." It contains no altars and apart from opening prayers at sessions of Congress it is not formal worship space, but the assault on it and partial sacking of it is repeatedly described as desecration, the sullyng of something that is holy, bordering on the destruction of that which is divine.

In today's Gospel, Jesus can't bear the desecration of His Father's house, and He does something about it. Forget Jesus, "meek and mild, who became a little Child." This is a grown-up Jesus who's had enough and isn't going to take it anymore! The usual title of this scene, "the cleansing of the Temple," is way too tame. "Cleansing" makes it sound like our Lord used a mop and a bucket of soapy water. No, He used a whip. And the result wasn't a return to order. It was the onset of chaos. Imagine the noise! Our Lord started a **stampede** of cattle and sheep, who must have made quite a ruckus. We're not talking the

quiet lowing of cows and baaing of sheep that provided a lullaby for the newborn Babe of Bethlehem. We're talking the frantic sounds of animals whipped into a frenzy, driven out of their accustomed space, followed close behind by angry owners trying to control and corral them. Once the animals were on the move, bolting for any exit they could find, our Lord turned to the money changers who were watching the action, alarmed and incredulous. He was a carpenter, a builder, an artisan with wood, and He was strong. It didn't take much for him to topple the tables and send thousands of coins skittering across the floor of the Court of the Gentiles where the money changers had set up shop. (I wonder if any onlookers dove for those valuable coins from every corner of the Roman Empire, like a movie scene in which a briefcase of money accidentally opens, is caught by the wind, and sends bills sailing through the air, much to the delight of passersby who lunge and grab and stuff them into their pockets and purses.)

The doves for sale are in cages, so rather than freeing them, our Lord yells at their owners, *"Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"* (John 2:16) (The court was open air, but still, it must have smelled **so** bad with all those animals....) Jesus' actions and words are so passionate, even **violent**, that looking back on it later the Scripture verse that comes to the disciples is, *"Zeal for your house will consume me"* (Psalm 69:9). It's like they barely recognize Jesus. He's aflame with anger, no doubt about it. We heard some anger in last week's Gospel when Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" But that's mild compared to this.

So **why** is Jesus so mad? In St. Matthew's version of the story, our Lord quotes Scripture and says:

'My house shall be called a house of prayer';
but you are making it a den of robbers.' (Matt. 21:13)

In *The Message* paraphrase, the money changers are called loan sharks. They're not lending money in this case, but they're **exchanging** secular money for Temple money, which doesn't have the image of the emperor or any Greek or Roman god on it. When we travel abroad, we change U.S. dollars to Euros or pounds or pesos or whatever other currency we need. We pay for that service, but not **extravagantly**. The money changers in the Temple charged **a lot**. For instance, the Temple tax that every Jew over the age of 19 had to pay was the equivalent of about 2 days wages. It cost **another** day's wages just to exchange everyday money for Temple money. That's an extremely high rate of exchange. In Our Lord's mind and heart it was highway robbery of the poor who could barely afford the Temple tax no less the money changer's fee. He **couldn't tolerate** the financial abuse of the faithful in the name of religion. It angered Him terribly; that anger compelled Him to act.

Even though our Lord's angry actions created temporary chaos and made a mess, they served a good purpose. That's the difference between the deadly sin of "wrath" that we hear about in our Lenten e-devotions, and the righteous anger that Jesus showcases in today's Gospel. Wrath tears down; righteous anger builds up. It corrects an injustice or rights a wrong. Wrath brings suffering; righteous anger intends to bring healing.

If I feel wrath, it's probably because someone has hurt **me**; I feel wronged and I want vengeance. If I experience righteous anger, it's probably because **somebody else** has been hurt; I want **them** to receive **justice**. Jesus overturned the money changers' tables because they were fleecing the poor, not because they were picking **His** pocket. He drove out the cattle, the sheep, the keepers of the doves because they profaned **His Father's** house, not because they offended Him. In the letter to the Hebrews (10:31) we read:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

As we heard in the first lesson from Exodus, the giving of the Ten Commandments, our God is a “jealous” God who doesn’t put up with our worship of false gods or our giving highest allegiance to anyone or anything other than the true God. Maybe we could say, God’s love has teeth.... God is not namby-pamby. God isn’t laissez-faire about our dalliance with the devil. God isn’t apathetic about our flirting with or falling to sin. God cares that we honor sacred space, not just in terms of the physical sanctuary, but also honoring our own bodies as temples – of the Holy Spirit. And if our bodies are sacred, so is the flesh and blood of every human being. The hunger and starvation of so many brothers and sisters should make us feel righteous anger and compel us to action. Oppression of the poor, persecution of religious minorities, discrimination against people of color, ostracizing of the mentally ill, abandonment of the addicted, rejection of those seeking asylum, refusal of refugees, these are sins that make God’s blood boil and that should fan the flames of righteous anger within us, too, spurring us to action.

In Ephesians (4:26) we read, “...do not let the sun go down on your anger.” (Someone has quipped, “My grandparents promised to never go to bed angry. They’ve been awake for 52 years.”¹) Some anger is intended to stay with us, though, righteous anger that shouldn’t burn out until wrongs have been righted and injustices corrected. May the Holy Spirit, purifying Fire of God, feed our righteous anger. May the Holy Spirit, the Breath of God, “inspire” us with courage to overturn tables of injustice, creating a sacred space of safety and justice for all people. Amen

¹Christopher News Note 609 (NY: The Christophers).

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