

Lent 3 B March 4, 2018
Holy Spirit Lutheran, Edmonton, AB

People of God, Grace and Peace to you this day in fullest measure from Jesus our Savior and Friend. Amen

It's always a good idea to think of how kids process some of these stories of Jesus. The little town I grew up in had two churches – a Lutheran and Roman Catholic – and almost everyone claimed membership in one or the other. Now, us Lutheran kids, in our young minds, knew those Catholics were allowed to play Bingo in their churches to raise money for their mission projects, and we Lutherans were not.

So, whenever this text was read, us Lutheran kids, always putting a new twist on the temple cleansing story, wondered when Jesus would come and overturn those Bingo tables, sending the cards flying all over the church basement and spilling the little numbers out of the cage that spun them around. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Jesus would shout as he tipped over the cash boxes. However, in our young minds, we were quite sure that Jesus would **never have been upset** with the Lutheran potluck suppers or the strawberry festivals we had to raise money for missions!! Fortunately, we grew up and all became friends!

Greek mythology tells a story about one of the greatest cleanup jobs of all time. The superhuman Hercules is given the challenge of clearing out a gigantic stable where thousands of animals are kept. No one thinks he can do it. But, being quite clever, Hercules diverts a river to run through the stables. As the waters pour through, all the grime and filth is swept away.

In today's gospel, Jesus tackles a "mess" in the temple in Jerusalem. Turning over tables, pouring out coins, driving out the cattle and sheep and doves with a whip and raising his voice – sounds like a horrible noisy day in the place of worship **with a lot of feathers flying!** What was this all about anyway? We may wonder where is that "Gracious and merciful, slow to anger" Jesus?

Well, let's get some perspective of Jesus' life and mission. This story is found in all the Gospels – but in Matthew, Mark and Luke it comes near the end of Jesus life where his whole outburst became the last straw leading to his arrest.

But in **John's record today**, he puts it at the beginning of Jesus ministry because he presents Jesus as the Lamb of God making *no* further need for sacrifice or the old temple laws of purification. For John, Jesus' actions in the temple pointed to the **heart of who Jesus was** and what he had come to do. So, this story had to come at the beginning of his ministry, not at the end.

A closer look at what happened just before all this fuss gives us a better idea of the heart of Jesus. He's just come from a wedding in Cana - they ran out of wine so Jesus told the steward to fill six stone jars that were needed for the rites of purification – with fresh water. And it was the best tasting wine of the evening!

By the time of Jesus, an elaborate system of purification had developed from OT laws. Some things were considered pure and others impure. In his book, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time", Marcus Borg writes: (Quote) "***the effect of the purity system was to create a world with social boundaries; between pure and impure, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile...***" (end quote) So enter Jesus who takes that water, supposedly to be used for those purification rites separating the pure and the not pure – and, with a little smile, maybe even a little smirk on his face, turns it into wine – a celebration!

Story after story, we see Jesus challenging the rules that declared people pure or impure and overturned those rules with compassion. Compassion for the Samaritan woman at the well – she was considered impure; compassion for the sheep who are not yet part of God's fold. I wonder, who are those people in our community?

It's no accident that Jesus goes immediately to the Temple in Jerusalem - the temple was at the **heart of this purity system** and had become a marketplace. Granted, the moneychangers were a necessity because in order to buy an unblemished animal for sacrifice, folks needed to exchange their Roman coins, with the head of Caesar on them, for Jewish coins. However, now with Jesus on the scene – who had just changed all the purification water into the wine of celebration up the road at Cana - there is no need for changing money, for purchasing animals, for making sacrifice...not then or ever again!

You see, with the arrival of Jesus, God's presence had come in a new way making the Temple no longer the only location of God. God is now present in the Word made flesh – Jesus! God is standing in front of them in the person of Jesus! The Incarnation means God comes in Jesus – God is not sitting in a room somewhere ignoring us, but is relational in our lives.

Like Israel's greatest prophets before him, Jesus longed to draw people back to God's heart, back to the first commandment: "***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.***"

This is a commandment grounded in relationship between God and us. **Remember who you are**, Jesus was saying, and even more importantly, **remember whose you are**. Your worth is not measured in categories, but in God's liberating miracle bringing you out of Egypt, out of exile, out of whatever bondage you were in. And, people of God - out of whatever **binds us** today as well.

Could Jesus be saying to us –Clear away your selective hearing and your selective sight; clear away your selective compassion as you judge who is living right and who is not; clear away your selective worship styles you have been doing for years. "I am doing a new thing – can't you see it?"

In a few weeks, we will hear another story of Jesus on his knees washing his disciples' feet. And again, tables are overturned! Who's the master? Who's the servant? Jesus says: "***I give you a new commandment that you love one another.***" By this everyone will know that you are my disciples--**not** by maintaining boundaries, **not** by naming some pure and others impure, **not** by protecting the church from getting dirty, but by **this love you have for one another**.

This might be a day as we journey through Lent when **our** tables need to be overturned, **our** money scattered, our feathers may need to fly. I encourage us to take an honest look at ourselves as we come to worship: “What is the stuff in our lives that is getting in the way of our worship of God?” Or to ask that Missional question: Where do I see God active in my life – in my family – my workplace or my school?

Allow yourselves this Lenten season time to prepare – not prepare to be worthy of God - we are already worthy because of Jesus; – but allow this Lent to be a time for waking up to be surprised at where you see God showing up in your lives.

I suspect as we allow God to clean out the “marketplaces” in our lives and in our church, there may be some overturning here as well of our tables of apathy, complacency and prejudice. Then, with God’s help, as we take a stand against injustice– we might begin to overturn shattered lives and become the voice of the lost and lonely. Then we begin, in a small way, to understand that deep disruptive compassion of God that had Jesus so upset in the Temple that day!

And when feathers fly, we just might begin to soar! Amen

Let’s pray – Gracious God, we need some spring cleaning! We confess our excuses, our ignorance, and our silence. Move us out of our pews, our committees, our systems, our privileged high places. Take our complacency and pride in our comfort, and in its place - rise up a people, who believe deeply, share boldly, dare to risk, and to love with hope. Amen