

Sermon – The Third Sunday in Lent

John 2: 13-22

The gospel passage from John this morning is one I refer to regularly. It is not a passage that I go to for solace or comfort. It is a passage that I recall when I get annoyed or even angry. It is a passage that shows us another dimension of Jesus, a passionate and law-abiding man who was not afraid to upset the religious authorities who had become corrupted, with fiery passion, even anger.

Many people, Christians especially, often frown and tut-tut, when someone gets angry. Anger, like a lot of our human emotions, is complex and can be used in a multiple of ways. We can get angry when someone doesn't listen to us. We can get angry in our cars when we get cutoff by an aggressive driver. We can become angry when we see and experience injustice. We can also become angry to get attention because that is a learnt behavior.

The past four years has shown us how people can manipulate our emotions to force us to become angry. I'll never forget a comment made by the last president after the election. He said, "we have to keep them angry," referring to his followers, which to me showed deliberate intent to use anger as a weapon to perpetuate violence.

The country as we well know is very polarized with the so-called political left and right trading angry insults, twitter messages and in some case physical violence. With this type of behavior it's no wonder the country finds itself with such a high level of discord. At the heart of community discord and violence is rivalry. Rivalry between individuals and groups of people to force their agenda.

Violence and rivalry in communities, and families, seems to be a part of our human nature. This type of behavior is well documented in scripture and I don't think we have made too many strides toward overcoming it during the past few thousand years.

In today's Old Testament reading from Exodus we are taken to a time where the chosen people of Israel are on a journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land God promised to them. The promise of freedom was not enough to stop them from squabbling and complaining about the uncertainty of their predicament. They lost sight of the main goal of their exodus and craved tangible idols and longed for their time in slavery because that's where they found certainty.

God of course knew their hearts and gave Moses the Law that would help them understand their relationship with God and with each other. They had been freed from the constraints of slavery but didn't know how to live in the new environment. Without a set of common beliefs, standards and expectations the community would rapidly descend into anarchy and violence.

The psalmist King David wrote in today's psalm, "The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent. The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart; * the commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light to the eyes."

The ten laws that God provided Moses revives the soul and rejoice the heart, they give wisdom and light to the eyes. These words are tender and beautiful and reveal to us the true intent of the law.

The law wasn't been given to be a negative for the community, rather the laws were given to aid the community and help the community grow and flourish. Without laws derived for the well-ordering of society, anarchy would reign with the strongest overpowering the weakest. Even with laws we see how autocratic leaders bend the laws of justice to further their agenda of suppression. We even saw the former president doing just this.

The law that was handed to Moses for the community consisted of two broad groups. The first four laws defined how to live in relation to God – God as one monotheistic being, with no rivals that humans can create, that asks us to honor God's name as holy and sets a day aside for us each week to rest and to worship. The last six laws are rules for how to live with each other. Within these six laws the first one is about honor and respect, the next four are prohibitions on certain acts – you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal or bear false witness.

The final law does not prohibit an act, rather it warns against coveting or desiring to possess something you don't have. The law says you shall not covet your neighbor's house, wife, slave animals nor anything that belongs to them.

Desire for what we don't have often produces rivalry. If a man does not love his wife and shows no interest in her, he is likely to change his attitude if another man shows interest in his wife. He realizes all of a sudden that if he doesn't show interest this man could attract his wife from him. The other man becomes a rival to the husband. How many times have we read about a jealous husband or wife violently attacking the other or their new love interest in a fit of rage?

If we fast forward from Moses' to Jesus' time, he also knew the human condition intimately. Jesus learnt the Law at the feet of the temple rabbis. He would have known the value of the Law and that keeping it was the main way to honor God and each other. Jesus in turn became a teacher and rather than preach prohibitions he taught more by modeling a love for God and helping people to love their neighbor.

Jesus always sought to point us toward God and encouraged us to imitate his life so we could draw closer to God. He did not do this out of a desire for self-love, rather he invites us to imitate his desire for God. The Holy Spirit directed him toward the goal of his life on which his intention was fixed: to resemble God the Father as much as possible. Jesus' life goal was to become the perfect image of God, thus giving to us a way into our own relationship with God.

If the goal of the Law was peace amongst humankind, then Jesus' invitation to model his behavior as he seeks to resemble God, is the foundation of community living that we all need to adopt. If we understand desire and rivalry in human relationships we can understand the source of conflict in our lives and try to address it. How we live our lives as Christians is vitally important both for ourselves and for the community, for we are agents of Jesus love and promoters of peace and goodwill.

By understanding that Jesus saw his whole life as a journey closer to God his Father, it is no wonder that he grew angry when he saw the corruption of the temple. The temple after all was the embodiment of God on earth for Jews.

The writer of today's gospel account places the story of Jesus clearing the temple at the beginning of his account of the good news rather than toward the end after Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last

time. Biblical scholars believe that historically the event probably did happen as Matthew, Mark and Luke write it because it provides a reason why the temple priests turned against Jesus.

John though likes symbolism and his account of Jesus life is full of it. Placing the story upfront establishes very early the symbol of Jesus and the purpose of his life. John is keen for us to know this early so that it becomes the lens through which we understand the rest of his writings.

The temple is a great symbol representing the power of God on earth. The temple was at the heart of Judaism and it was the most sacred place to them. Today, the western wall in Jerusalem is the holiest place in Judaism because it is the closest place to the site of the second temple that was destroyed in the year 70 CE.

The temple consisted of three distinct areas. The outer court where anyone could go and where the sacrificial animals were kept and where the sacrifices were performed. The atmosphere was noisy, smelly and dirty.

The inner court was only for Jews who had undertaken the purity rites. It was the place of worship and teaching. The heart of the temple was the Holy of Holies, which was deep inside and could only be entered by the Chief Priest once a year. It was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. This three-fold order of the temple reflected the chaotic sea, the earth and the heavens. It was like the roots, trunk and branches of a tree. Each part vital to the whole.

The temple was a house of prayer and a place to meet God. When Jesus goes into the temple and confronts the chaos he is doing it to point out the corruption of the space that is supposed to be holy and sacred.

God wasn't to be found in the noise and chaos. You might remember Elijah's encounter with God on Mount Horeb. God spoke to Elijah not from the wind, or the earthquake or the fire. God spoke to him from the "sheer silence."¹

The temple had been corrupted and human desire, rivalry and violence had destroyed its purpose. The chaos of animal sacrifice and the noise of the temple moneychangers made the worship of God difficult. The corruption meant the focus of their faith was on temple practices and not on God and prayer. The energy Jesus is described as exhibiting models for us the zeal we need to have to work for the world by overcoming adverse desire, rivalry and violence.

Our faith and our Christian ethics have evolved out of the Law and the good news of Jesus Christ. We read of Jesus life and study the scriptures to learn how to overcome the inherent human failings we have knowing that Jesus loves and forgives us. The Holy Spirit powers us on to grow deeper into our relationship with God.

I pray you will find this place and other quiet places to center your life in Christ and overcome the chaos that the world creates that keeps us distracted and far from God. May you encounter God this day like Elijah in the 'sheer silence.'

Amen

¹ 1 Kings 19:9-14

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