

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year B, 2009
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Today's gospel reading is startling – an angry Jesus and what could quite possibly be described as a temper tantrum in the Temple, of all places. This is not Jesus as we normally think of him. There is little wonder that many, on first hearing this story, find themselves quite shocked! The story needs some explanation, but it is an important story because it conveys a very important teaching: righteousness comes not by law, but love; and salvation is not by obedience to law, but by grace through faith. Even so, righteous living must be guided by ethical behavior, and religious rules define ethical behavior. How easy it is for us to forget this.

To really understand our Lord's actions, described in today's gospel reading, and to find the teaching in this gospel lesson, we need to begin with the Old Testament reading from Exodus. Here we have the story of God's gift of the Ten Commandments. Every one of us knows of the Ten Commandments. Some of us, hopefully most of us, have some knowledge of what they are about. But what we need to look at, this morning, in order to understand our gospel story, is the context of the Commandments as part of religious law. When we talk about these rules of righteous behavior, we need to understand them in their larger context. They are but a part, albeit a most important part, of a larger covenant between God and humanity. God has promised to be the God of those who believe in him, and to redeem, from sin, those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord. The Ten Commandments lay out for us the basic rules of civilized behavior and it is God's expectation that we follow them. But, they are only the basic rules and both Jews and Christians have always had to augment them to define a workable religious ethic.

By the time of our Lord's earthly ministry, Jewish religion had developed a very complex system of religious practice to help people uphold the expectations of Jewish Law, or *Torah*. This system included the Ten Commandments, and it was a system that required animal sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem, ritual purity, Sabbath worship and a myriad of other things that the observant Jew had to do to maintain righteousness. This is not to say that those things were wrong. Certainly, most of the ethical requirements are incorporated into Christianity. But one aspect of Jewish religious practice greatly troubled Jesus, and that was what a person had to do in order to offer a sacrifice. The Law required ritually clean animals that had to be purchased at the Temple. A problem, though, was that Roman currency was the currency of the realm, the only currency in use. To devout Jews, the coinage was considered idolatrous, because it was stamped with Caesar's image. Because of this, it could not be utilized on the Temple grounds. Therefore, it had to be exchanged, at rather usurious rates, for Temple coins. The exchange of money and the purchase of the animals took place within the sacred grounds of the Temple.

Jesus saw this practice for what it was - an unnecessary barrier between God and God's people, and it made him mad. He'd had enough, and decided to do something about it.

This is what we read about this morning. Jesus was especially upset by the dove sellers, because their animals were the sacrificial animals of the poor. The rich purchased sheep and oxen to offer as a sacrifice. John tells us that Jesus drove them all out, money changers and animal sellers, because he saw the whole practice of forcing people to buy the animals as an unnecessary barrier. There are two interesting points in John's account. One, Jesus didn't get arrested for doing this; and two, in John's story, this event took place at the beginning of his public ministry, where the other Gospels place it at the end. To be direct, if John's timing is correct, pulling a stunt like this should have ended our Lord's career before it began, and it could be that John is wrong and the other Gospels are correct – it happened at the end of his ministry and was a key episode leading to his arrest.

Regardless of placement in the Gospels, the results are the same: controversy. Commentators remark that Jesus wanted to eliminate the system that kept God and the people of God apart, while enriching the pockets of some at the expense of the poor. The controversy built, day by day, as Jesus preached that true righteousness came only in the law of love, and that those things which harmed people, especially the downtrodden, the hungry, the destitute, were simply wrong. No one could claim to be righteous, if they were harming others, even if they were doing it for religious purposes. Obedience to the Law could not trump love. Because Jesus took a position contrary to that of the religious leaders, in due course they arrested him and had him killed.

Christians believe that our Lord's death was a sacrifice offered for our salvation, and his self-offering knew no favoritism. By Christ's death and resurrection, all who turn to him are redeemed. There is no inequality. Saint Paul once said that in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female; rather we are all one in Christ Jesus. We can take this further. There is no separation of humanity in God's mind, based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social status, wealth, education, race or anything else. The only distinction ever made is whether the person has come to God through the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. In Christ, that which is old, that which is broken, that which is unworthy is set aside and we are made whole, a new people, a forgiven people, worthy to stand before God's throne because, in our unworthiness, Christ's blood was shed for us. And, we recall, as we marvel at this grace of God in Christ, so unmerited, that our Lord's last commandment to us, a law which indeed trumps everything that had gone before, was this: "Love others as I have loved you." *Amen.*