

Year B, March 4, 2018  
3 Lent  
Christ Church, Mexia

O God, let your love and mercy wash over us as the spring rains wash over the earth, bringing promise of new life and hope. AMEN.

Daniel Boorstin, historian and the 12<sup>th</sup> Librarian of the U.S. Congress, is quoted as saying: "Two centuries ago, when a great man appeared, people looked for God's purpose in him. Today we look for his press agent." Jesus never let his popularity with the people go to his head, nor did he get distracted from his purpose. This latter point, I believe, is the key to the gospel this morning.

Today's gospel reading can cause us to wonder why Jesus "lost it" in the Temple. This is not the Jesus we know; most of the New Testament focuses on his love and compassion, his openness to all, his patience when being tested by Jewish religious leaders or having to explain again his messages to his disciples who seem to have difficulty understanding at times. Anger and frustration are rare emotions for him.

The vendors were at the Temple, to provide items for sacrifice; to allow those who came to worship "appropriately." One form of offering was really a tax, mentioned in the book of Leviticus, a half shekel. So that's why money changers were needed; many of these people would have had foreign currency, like Roman coins that were not permitted to be used for offerings, and some just might need change. The other reason for some vendors was the animal sacrifice mentioned in Exodus. If you had to make a long journey to the Temple with your animal, it would most likely get dirty or incur some other blemish that would render it an improper offering. So being able to purchase one for a reasonable price at the Temple was a good service.

So why did Jesus get so upset with these people who were facilitating compliance with the Law of the day? And by the way, this account is present in all four gospels, but John is the only one who reports Jesus using a whip of chords. In the others he used an "angry voice." Still, each of the accounts is a bit out of character for the Jesus we most often hear about and think we know. Returning to the question however...

It seems most likely that Jesus was attacking the "root" sin of these people. A root sin is not a sin *per se*, but rather a disposition toward sin, something that estranges us from our true selves, from God, and from our neighbor. Making money and having money is not in and of itself sinful. These can be occasions for grace, and if properly understood, can become a means toward spiritual growth or ends. But what happens too frequently is that they become ends in themselves; then what is good becomes sinful. Let me elaborate a little.

In his book, "To Have or to Be?" Erich Fromm contends that these two modes of existence, having or being, are continually struggling for the spirit of humankind. The having mode concentrates on material possession, power, and aggression and manifests itself in greed, envy and violence. While the being mode is based on love, sharing, and a concern for others, and leads to meaningful and productive, rather than wasteful, activities. But here's the rub: the having mode tends to dominate our lives, bringing us to the brink of psychological and social disaster – and we can see this in our economic system today. In Jesus' day the vendors had become greedy; they had become corrupt, even bribing priests. And they were doing this in God's house. They had become distracted from their purpose. Therefore, Jesus' reaction is understandable. He was, after all, fully human and humans have emotions. It also positions him to be like the prophets that came before him, signaling a need to change and reunite with God, following God's law, like the 10 commandments we heard in the Exodus reading this morning. And this may have been an important point for the author of John, who places this incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than near the end of it as the other gospels do.

Now let me share a story about Joseph Scriven, the author of the hymn "*What a Friend We Have in Jesus.*" Over 150 years ago, two business men were standing on a frigid and snowy street in Port Hope, Ontario, Canada when a small man carrying a saw walked by. One of them observed, "Now there is a man happy with his lot in life. I wish I could know his joy!" "He seems to be happy, all right," the other agreed. "I know he is a very hardworking, honest man."

"If he is that, the first replied, "then maybe I should run after him and hire him to cut some wood for me. I'm going to need some more to make it through the long winter months." "Oh," came the laughing reply, "he wouldn't work for you." "And why not?" demanded the first man. "I would pay him a fair wage!" "It's not that at all. You see, Joseph Scriven only cuts wood for people who cannot afford to pay

anyone to cut it for them, or for those who cannot cut it for themselves. Scriven gives his work to people in need and takes nothing for himself.”

Joseph was born in Ireland in 1819. He suffered more heartache and woe than most people would ever know. After graduating from London’s Trinity College in 1844, he began to teach and fell in love. The day before his wedding, his fiancée drowned. Grief stricken he immigrated to Canada to start anew. He fell in love again, and three weeks before the wedding the bride-to-be became ill and died. The shattered man had only his faith to sustain him. At age 25, taking seriously Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he sold all his possessions and vowed to give his life to the service of the physically handicapped and financially destitute. It was a vow he never broke, even though he was unable to visit his dying mother in Ireland. He wrote in a letter to her the words that eventually became the hymn. Joseph Scriven did not get distracted from his purpose.

On this Sunday we are invited to reflect on the ways in which we may live a distorted or distracted life, a life that denies the image of God within us and refuses to open ourselves to Christ’s cleansing; a life that may be more focused on having than being. On this Sunday, and on every day, we are encouraged to invite Christ into our lives so that he might drive out of us all that is not holy, as he drove the vendors from the Temple so many years ago.

(silence)

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.