

## Easter 4C 2019 Sermon

May 12, 2019

*John 10:22-30 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."*

The Jewish religion of Jesus' day was largely focused around the Temple in Jerusalem. Old Testament laws required that all good Jews offer sacrifices in the Temple at certain times of the year, or when some important events occurred (like the birth of a baby). And so it was a *monumental crisis* for the Jewish religion when, following a Jewish revolt some 40 years *after* Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Temple was utterly destroyed by Roman troops. The Jewish religion was *centered* around the Temple, and now it was gone! How could Judaism survive? And if it did, what form would it take?

Some Jewish sects, like the Pharisees, decided that Judaism should be reconstituted around the local synagogues and the scrupulous study and interpretation of their Bible – our Old Testament. But the Jews who had followed Jesus believed that living as a faithful Jew should resemble the way **Jesus** lived out *his* Jewish faith. Needless to say, these 2 Jewish groups – the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus – were at odds with each other. Over time, the *Pharisees'* version of Judaism became the "official" version, and Jews who were followers of Jesus were excommunicated from the synagogues.

Now the Gospel of John, written some 20 years **after** the destruction of the Temple, reflects this tension. John and his community of Jews who followed the Way of Jesus had almost certainly been excommunicated from the synagogues by the Pharisees, who had become the "official" overseers of the Jewish religion. And so, in writing his Gospel, John could not *help* but see the "officials" of Judaism in *Jesus'* day, who were still focused around the Temple, in a negative light; and even *more* than the other Gospel writers, John saw the **Temple** in a negative light.

Our Gospel story begins: "*At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.*" Now, the festival of the Dedication celebrates the cleansing and rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus in 164 B.C. So, John's story begins with Jesus walking in the **Temple**, in the Portico of *Solomon* (who built

the *first Temple*), during the feast of the Dedication of the **Temple**. In setting this scene, John could not be more clear that this story is going to be about the Temple and the whole Temple system! And the statement “It was winter” tells us that Jesus is going to get a chilly reception from the Temple officials.

The fact that Jesus had issues with the Jewish Temple system is demonstrated most clearly when **he** “cleanses” the Temple – turning over the tables of moneychangers and driving out the sacrificial animals – an event which is recounted in all four Gospels. But whereas in Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple occurs just *days* before his crucifixion, in John’s Gospel, Jesus cleanses the Temple at the **beginning** of his ministry! (John 2:13-22) Why does John tell the story of the cleansing of the Temple at the *beginning* of his Gospel? To signal to us readers that Jesus’ confrontation with the Temple authorities and the Temple system is going to be central to the meaning of his life and ministry from the very start. In fact, I’m convinced that John’s mention of Solomon reminds us readers that God was not all that enthusiastic about letting David **or** his son Solomon build a temple in the first place. <sup>1</sup>

In today’s story, the Jewish religious officials (whom John refers to simply as “the Jews”) ask Jesus whether he is the Messiah – a question that is not surprising, given all of Jesus’ miracles and healings. But whether or not people label him “Messiah” is really not Jesus’ concern. Later in John’s Gospel, Pontius Pilate tries to get Jesus to answer the question of whether he is the “King of the Jews”, and Jesus simply says, “You say so.” (18:33) Jesus is not interested in whether people call him either “Messiah” or “King.” Episcopal priest Gary Jones writes:

“Jesus’ role and identity cannot be reduced to a title; instead, his role and identity must be *experienced*. This becomes clear in the analogy of the sheep and shepherd. The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have *experienced* the shepherd and his ‘works,’ [and trust him]. In the same way, a child knows and trusts his or her mother because of *experience*, not reason...”<sup>2</sup>

This brings up the matter of Jesus’ use of the word “believe” in today’s story. As I have often mentioned, the Biblical Greek word that is translated “believe” is the Greek **verb** form of the word “faith”. But the English language does not **have** a verb form of the word “faith” (I don’t “faith” in God); so, the Greek verb is usually translated as either “believe” or “trust”. And I would suggest that this is one of the many places in John’s Gospel where one person or group understands a word one way, and another person or group understands it another way. “Believe” suggests an intellectual assent, while “trust” has to do with relationship and putting one’s life in another person’s hands. The sheep and shepherd image is helpful, therefore, since clearly “sheep” cannot “believe” in a shepherd, while they **do trust** the shepherd’s voice, and follow him. The Temple officials want to know *intellectually* whether Jesus is the Messiah, whereas Jesus’ identity can only

*truly* be known through *experiencing* him and his loving, healing works – like a sheep knows its shepherd.

And I think that we see a similar situation in Christianity today. All too often, we Christians, like the Temple officials, argue and fight about who *believes* the right things about God and Jesus, or who worships the right way; whereas if we are Jesus' *sheep*, the question is whether we will *listen* to and *follow* him in our own lives. "The early church grew dramatically," writes Fr. Jones, "not because multitudes were convinced of the truth of creeds and dogmas [or because people went to church every Sunday and worshipped the right way], but because multitudes **experienced** the living Lord and a new life"<sup>2</sup> in Him.

In John's earlier story of Jesus cleansing the Temple, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (2:19) When the leaders point out that it had taken forty-six years to build the Temple, the Gospel-writer John tells us that Jesus wasn't speaking of the Temple *building*, but was rather speaking about the Temple of his body. (2:21) The Temple of his body.

For 900 years, since Solomon built the first Temple, the Jews believed that God's presence was located in the Temple **building** in Jerusalem – in the Holy of Holies, to be exact; but in *John's* Gospel Jesus says that God's presence is located not in a building, but *in himself*. Is this not, after all, what God was saying to King David when, in response to David's suggestion that he build a Temple to God, God replies, "You will not build **me** a house; *I* will make **you** a house"? (2 Samuel 7:11b)<sup>3</sup> God wanted to reside in and among his people, rather than in a building.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright states that we have largely missed St. Paul's foundational point in his letters. Paul's main point was *not* that we are justified by belief in Jesus, as Protestants have often contended for the past 500 years; nor is it that we are justified by right worship and observing the sacraments, as Catholics have often asserted. Rather, Bishop Wright believes that "the great and supreme idea of Paul is that the new temple of God is the human person..."<sup>4</sup>

St. Paul states this clearly in writing to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that **you** are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?... For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." (1 Cor. 3:16-17) And again Paul writes: "we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and walk among them...'" (2 Cor. 6:16) And in Ephesians, Paul writes, "In [Christ] the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom **you** also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." (Ephesians 2:21-22) Note that these are indicative statements of fact. "You *are* God's

temple; God's Spirit *dwells* in you; we *are* the temple of the Living God." Paul states these things as **fact**; we do not have to **make** it so by believing the right things or going to church every Sunday and observing the sacraments. We only have to realize, to actualize, live out and unfold this fact in our personal and corporate lives: *You* and *I* are the dwelling place of God! Both John's Gospel and Paul's letters make that abundantly clear.

This is not to say that places and things cannot be holy. The ancient Celts spoke of "thin places," where the veil between this world and the full-blown Kingdom of God is very thin. A *church* can be made holy by years of prayer within its walls. *This* is a holy place. But the *purpose* for its holiness is to resonate with, and draw out, the Spirit of God which is within all of us who enter and pray here.

The Bible is a Holy Book. But it is holy because through its words the *living* Word - Christ - can resonate with, and encourage, the life of God that is in us, making it grow and flourish!

I also believe that Christ is, in some very real way, present in the outward form of Holy Communion – the consecrated bread and wine. Because of this, I was taught to kneel or bow before the presence of the blessed bread and wine on the altar or in the tabernacle. But Richard Rohr has persuaded me to change this practice slightly and NOT to genuflect to the consecrated bread and wine on the altar or in the tabernacle *after* I have received communion; because in receiving communion, I have just taken the life of Christ *into myself*, and I am going to take it *with* me out into the world. I haven't left Christ at the altar or in the tabernacle, that I should turn and bow to him **there** as I leave the altar rail; Christ is within us as we leave the altar and go out into the world! You and I are the temple of the living God!

"I will make **you** a house," God told King David. "**You** are God's temple," St. Paul tells us, "God's Spirit dwells in **you**." And notice that there is no "if" in any of these statements – "You are God's Temple IF you believe such and such;" "God's Spirit dwells in you IF you do such and such." No. You are God's temple, period. God's Spirit dwells in you, period. These are indicative statements of fact.

So, I offer a suggestion: When you read Holy Scripture, or hear it read and preached on Sunday, allow it to nourish that Spirit within you and bring it more to your consciousness. When you receive Holy Communion, know that you take it into yourself, and that it becomes the very cells of your body, which is God's temple, strengthening the life of Christ in you. And when you go back to your seat after receiving communion, don't turn back and bow to the altar, for you have just taken Christ into your own body! Go forth from this place "to love and serve the Lord" **knowing** that you *are* God's Temple and God's life lives in you – and in every precious child of God you meet.

AMEN

1 Scholars note that the various authors of the Old Testament were of two minds on whether God wanted a Temple built to him. An example: “[God said:] Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (2 Samuel 7:7)

2 *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*, emphasis mine

3 see also Acts 7:48-50: “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?’”

4 from an unpublished talk by Richard Rohr, Feb. 2015 at CAC