

Lent 3B 2015 Sermon

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

It is a striking scene, seemingly so uncharacteristic of the "Jesus meek and mild" which is so often our overriding image of Jesus. Here, in the Temple courts, Jesus dumps out the coins of the moneychangers, overturns their tables, makes a whip of cords and drives the moneychangers, with their sheep and cattle, out of the Temple. Powerful physical action bordering on violence, it is so incongruous with the portrayal of Jesus in most of the rest of the Gospels. And yet this story of Jesus' "cleansing of the Temple" (as it has been called) is one of the most well-attested events in Jesus' life, being found in all four Gospels. Of course, as is so

often the case, the event has been interpreted differently by the different Gospel-writers.

Those of you who have studied the Gospels or have listened to my sermons for 17 years know that the subtle differences between the way the same story is told in different Gospels reveal a lot about the *point* that a particular Gospel-writer is trying to get across; and nowhere is this better illustrated than in **John's** telling of the cleansing of the Temple – our Gospel reading today.

The first and most obvious difference between John's interpretation of this event in Jesus' life and that of the other three Gospel-writers is found in the simple fact of the placement of the story in John's Gospel. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this incident occurs at the beginning of the final week of Jesus' life, and it seems to be the tinder that sparks off the conflagration between Jesus and the Temple authorities, which will lead to his eventual crucifixion. But in **John's** Gospel, the story is placed at the very *beginning* of Jesus' ministry – for John sees the event as foretelling the meaning of all that is to come in Jesus' ministry.

The second difference between John's interpretation of this event and that of the other three Gospel-writers is found in the *reason* Jesus gives for driving the moneychangers out. In the other three Gospels, Jesus says, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer', but you have made it a den of robbers." Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasize Jesus' anger at how the poor are being swindled. But in *John's* Gospel, Jesus says, "Stop making my Father's house a **marketplace!**" -- and with that, the focus is changed from how the moneychangers are cheating the poor to the whole matter of how worshippers are to relate to God. By driving out the moneychangers, John's Jesus is saying, "God does not relate to you *commercially*. **Exchange** is *not* the name of the game – you giving God a sacrificial animal and in return God giving you forgiveness of sins and help in various endeavors." (John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Colleagueville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 90)

"The mentality of the *marketplace* had so permeated Temple worship," writes Fr. John Shea, "that it had degenerated into deal making. Jesus' Father, however, is *not* a deal maker. He does not exchange favors for sacrifices. The Father is a free flow of spiritual life and love that cannot be bought, bartered, bargained, or bribed. Therefore, animals and money are inappropriate for two reasons. First, they belong to the physical and social spheres and [therefore] mask the *spiritual* nature of the relationship between the Father and worshipers. Second, they are gifts of the **worshippers** and so mask the *priority* of the **Father's** free gift of love. They give the impression of payoff... They may be needed in the Temple, but they are **not** needed in 'my Father's house' (2:16)." (*ibid.*, pp. 90-91) The *new* temple, we find out later in our Gospel reading, is not a building, but Jesus' body – which is what we, the church, are. And in this new temple, the church, our relationship with God is not about deal-making.

My friends, it is so easy for us to hear this Gospel reading and think to ourselves, “Yeah, those Jewish moneychangers and religious leaders obviously had it all wrong. We wiser, smarter Christians know that animal sacrifices are not what God wants.” But before we write off this Gospel event as a teaching which applies *only* to those moneychangers and Temple officials, it would behoove us to stop for a moment and think how deeply ingrained the idea of *quid-pro-quo*, this-for-that deal-making is in our *own* physical and social lives. After all, which of Jesus’ parables do we find the most offensive? Hands down, it is the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16), where the workers who work only one hour get paid the same as the workers who have toiled 12 hours in the hot sun. It goes against our deeply engrained sensibility of *quid-pro-quo*, this in exchange for that.

“Deal making is hardwired into the human condition,” Fr. Shea writes. “It permeates social arrangements. ‘If you do that, I’ll do this’ or ‘If you give me that, I’ll give you this’ is implicit in so much human interaction. Something for something is the air we breathe. Back scratching is just how we get through until Friday.

“Therefore, it is no surprise that ‘dealing’ is easily transferred from the *social* to the *spiritual* sphere. How we get what we want from one another is analogously how we get what we want from God, and how God gets what God wants from us.” (*ibid.*, p. 93) Is it not?

Throughout the Old Testament, we see this idea in play. When the people of Israel obey God and God’s laws, they receive God’s blessing; when they disobey, God sends foreign armies or other setbacks to punish the Israelites. You scratch God’s back and God will scratch yours. “The basic framework,” Fr. Shea notes, is “deal *making*, deal *breaking*, and deal *keeping*.” (*ibid.*)

But it doesn’t always work; and close study of the Old Testament will show how the ancient writers of the Hebrew Scriptures struggled with the instances where *quid-pro-quo* **didn’t** work. Why did Moses, that great deliverer of the Israelites, have to die before entering the Promised Land? How unfair is *that*, given all that Moses had gone through? The reason the editors of the Torah come up with – that somehow Moses must have “doubted” during that time when God gave water from the rock in the wilderness – seems flimsy at best; but Moses must have done *something* wrong, or God would have let him enter into the Promised Land – right? We assume that *quid-pro-quo* is built into the DNA of God. The psalmists, too, constantly ask God, “Why do I suffer when I have been so faithful and obedient?” The whole book of Job struggles with this question of why good people suffer, why *quid-pro-quo*, this-for-that, doesn’t always work.

In *Christian* theology, the prevailing theory of atonement (**how** it is that Jesus reconciles us with God) – the prevailing theory of the atonement over the past 800 years posits that Jesus offered God his life in exchange for God’s forgiveness of

our sins. It is still *quid-pro-quo*, a deal made with God in exchange for our salvation. The mindset of the marketplace is so ingrained in the physical and social fabric of our lives that it colors our understanding of our relationship with God, also.

“We do not notice,” writes Fr. Shea, “that the *quid-pro-quo* way we deal with one another is something *like* **and** something *unlike* how God deals with us and we deal with God. The ‘something unlike’ drops out, and we think we are literally bargaining with God. This is more than an innocent theological error. It is a major obstacle to spiritual development.” (*ibid.*)

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her pioneering studies of grief, identified the third stage of grieving as “bargaining”: the phenomenon wherein a person facing serious loss is **driven** by the hope that *some* deal can be struck with God to *avoid* the impending loss. “God, I promise to reform my life, or give away everything I own, if you will only spare the life of my loved one.” Kubler-Ross saw this deal-making impulse over and over again in her observations of those who were in the process of grief.

John Shea notes that “In the movie, *A House of Sand and Fog*, the son of an Islamic man is shot [and grievously injured]. The father is distraught and instinctively begins to pray. He says at one point, ‘If you let my son live, I will lay in the park, put bird seed on my eyes, and let the birds eat my eyes out.’

“This deal emerges out of the dark recesses of his being, wells up from a primordial space,” Fr. Shea continues. “That space dwells in all people. Stress and tragedy bring it out of hiding. For most of us, there is no eliminating this deep dealing-making tape. But we **can** slowly record another tape.

“The Father of Jesus, who is often not at home in the images of the marketplace, **is** at home when we are simply **grateful** for life and *serve* life in whatever way we can. When we can receive and give and when we can find joy in both.... we have been admitted into the ‘Holy of Holies’ (see Heb 9:3). Our ‘sacrifice’ is cooperation with the **divine** ‘sacrifice’ that makes life holy by self-giving. The joy is not in making a good deal, but in getting *beyond* deal.” (*ibid.*, p. 94)

Getting beyond deal, and cooperating with the divine sacrifice that makes life holy by self-giving. Not self-giving in order to **get** something in return, but simply self-giving – what St. Paul, in that marvelous hymn in his letter to the Philippians, called Jesus’ “self-emptying”. It is in joining our lives in union with Jesus in the act of self-emptying that a *new* “tape” is recorded **over** our old, worn tape of “deal-making”. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” (Phil. 2:5f) Paul says; and he then goes on to describe that mind as being a mind not of deal-making, but of self-emptying love.

I think this is why St. Paul says, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil...” (for that would be sinking into the old tapes of *quid-pro-quo*)... but rather Paul says “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” (Rom. 12:17-21) Why would returning good for evil be like heaping burning coals on one’s enemies’ heads? Because it would force them out of the socially-conditioned *quid-pro-quo* way of seeing and living life, and into the spiritual realm of self-emptying love; and because that realm is so unfamiliar (it is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”, today’s Epistle says), it is incredibly uncomfortable and disorienting. Like having burning coals heaped on one’s head.

There is a marvelous line in our Eucharistic Prayer in which we pray: “we earnestly desire thy fatherly goodness to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, whereby we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies.” (*Book of Common Prayer* p. 342) Our “sacrifice” is not something we offer to pay God back, or to purchase God’s forgiveness or mercy; it is simply “praise and thanksgiving”. It is the outpouring of “our selves, our souls and bodies,” after the example of, and in union with, Christ.

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AMEN