

Lent 3B 2021 Sermon

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.

Today's Gospel story of Jesus "cleansing the Temple" is found in all 4 Gospels; but **John's** telling of the story, which we just heard, is different from the way the story is told in the other three Gospels. One major difference between **John's** telling of this event and that of the other three Gospels lies 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 robbed. 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 robbing the poor to the whole matter of how worshippers are to relate to God. By driving out the moneychangers, John's Jesus is saying (and I quote John Shea), "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... [But] the mentality of the *marketplace* had so permeated Temple worship that it had degenerated into deal making. Jesus' Father, however, is *not* a deal maker... [He] is a free flow of spiritual life and love..."¹ A free flow of spiritual life and love.

My friends, I think you and I can see how easily the degeneration of Temple worship into deal-making could be; how easy it was for the mentality of the marketplace to permeate Temple worship. For we, too, live out our lives in a society which is based on a marketplace mentality.

"Deal making is hardwired into the human condition," Fr. Shea notes. "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..."

"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."² Isn't it?

No. Because, just as Isaac Newton's laws of physics no longer hold true when we enter the realm of sub-atomic particles, so the laws of the marketplace no longer hold true in the realm of

the spirit, where the governing principle is **not** “this in exchange for that.” The governing principle in the realm of the Spirit is the free flow of God’s life and love and grace, amazing grace, which is offered to every person, whether or not they have done anything to deserve it or have given anything in exchange for it. For those of us who live in a society where *exchange* is the air we breathe, it is *hard* for us to enter into the realm of spirit, where this principle no longer holds. After all, which of Jesus’ parables do we find the most offensive? Hands down, it is the parable of the workers in the vineyard³, where the workers who work only one hour get paid the same as the workers who have toiled twelve hours in the hot sun. It goes against our deeply engrained sensibility of *quid-pro-quo*, this in exchange for that. Work so many hours, get a corresponding amount of pay.

If we live steeped in this marketplace culture of ours, how do we, at the **same** time, live in a spiritual realm which is governed by the free flow of divine grace? We might begin with that image derived from Jesus’ farewell address in John’s Gospel – the image of being “in the world but not of the world.”⁴ We have one foot in our culture, the kingdom of *this* world, and the other foot in the realm of the spirit – the kingdom of God, to use Jesus’ term. The question we must ask is: Which kingdom is our homeland? In which kingdom have we placed our heart, our trust, our life? St. Paul tells us that our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20); and the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth... seeking a homeland.” (11:13b, 14b) The kingdom of this world was not their homeland.

In a talk given to Duke University students years ago, Huston Smith, an expert on world religions, offered one word that would best characterize each of the world’s major religions. What was the one word that best characterized Christianity? Forgiveness. Forgiveness. And forgiveness **breaks** that mentality of this-for-that, getting what one deserves. For when I forgive a debt, I’m *giving up* my **right** to be paid back; and in forgiving someone who has hurt me, I’m *giving up* my “right” to get even. Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth [which is the marketplace mentality].’ But I say to you... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well...”⁵

And yet, despite these words of Jesus, and others like them, 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 even colors our understanding of our relationship with God. “For most of us,” notes Fr. Shea, “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. ...The joy is not in making a good deal, but in getting *beyond* deal.”⁶

Getting beyond deal. Not self-giving in order to **get** something in return, but simply self-giving, period – what St. Paul, in that marvelous hymn in Philippians, called Jesus’ “self-emptying.” It

is in joining our lives in union with Christ in the act of self-emptying love that a *new* “tape” is recorded **over** our old, worn tapes of “deal-making”. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,”⁷ Paul writes; and he then goes on to *describe* that mind as being a mind, not of deal-making, but of self-emptying love. This is why St. Paul can say, “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...”⁸

There is a marvelous line in our Rite I Eucharistic Prayer where 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.”⁹ Our “sacrifice” is not something we offer in order to pay God back, or to purchase God’s forgiveness, mercy, or God’s amazing grace. It is simply the outpouring, the offering, of “our selves, our souls and bodies,” after the example of, and in union with, Christ.

John Shea writes: “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”¹⁰ to living life from within the mind and heart of our crucified and risen Lord.

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 90-91

² *ibid.*, p. 93

³ Matthew 20:1-16

⁴ John 17:11-18; see also Philippians 3:20

⁵ Matthew 5:38-40

⁶ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 94

⁷ Philippians 2:5f

⁸ Romans 12:17-21

⁹ *Book of Common Prayer* p. 342

¹⁰ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 94

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:23