

Vocabulary of Faith: Temple 3/4/18

During the weeks leading up to Easter....in this time that the Church calls the Season of Lent... we have been journeying through our vocabulary of faith together and looking at words we often hear around the church, but that we may have not given much thought to.

In our first week of this series, we kicked things off by looking at the words Lectionary and Transfiguration.....Then in week two, we explored the term: "Prevenient Grace" and talked about how God's love is with us before we even realize we need it....

Last week....we looked at the word Evangelism and thought about how we can reclaim its original meaning of being Messengers of the Good News....and let go of all the baggage that has been associated with that word.

And today...the Lectionary....which as a reminder to everyone is essentially the source that recommends which Biblical readings the worldwide church should embrace as a sign of our universal connection to one another....brings us to the story of Jesus cleansing the temple.

So, we will take a little time to reflect on what exactly this event meant...what the temple was....and how our understanding of God's temple can impact our church and our personal lives nearly 2000 years after these tables were turned over...

The gospel lesson for today has often been embraced by Christians as proof of Jesus' humanity, a time when he "lost it," so to speak, totally exasperated by the use of the Temple as a money-making enterprise.

You see, the temple authorities had set up money-changing tables to permit those coming to Jerusalem from various countries to observe Passover in order to convert their legal tender into something acceptably pure for a temple offering.

And unfortunately, many of the those involved did more than simply exchange: they also made huge profits in the process. What had once been a source of joy and happiness, a place where the people could be reminded of the source of their blessings and their obligations as God's people, had now become a center of commerce.....What should have been holy and sacred for the people had become profane and an oppressor of the people.

The idea that the gift God had given to the people was now being used to oppress...steal and take advantage of others was what filled Jesus with righteous anger.

In preparing for this sermon, I started thinking about the time when I could really empathize with Jesus' anger, and the closest thing I could come to identifying with it were the times I have had young people in the church come and confide in me that they were in some way being neglected or abused...and the times when I have especially filled with anger are in the instances the police or child social services or their parents were either unable or unwilling to do anything about it.

These are the times in ministry when I want to March down to the home of the person or people who have hurt those I care for and just let them have it.... To turn over those tables.....And let them know that they cannot get away with hurting the people that are part of my Church family....

You may have experienced similar rage when people you care for are hurt....

Most of us know this deep anger, and usually it's about something that seems wrong or unjust or that hurts vulnerable and innocent people.

However, there is more for us to glean from this passage than permission for us to express righteous anger.

But before we go any farther, First, allow me to give share with you a little bit about the history of the Jewish Temple...

According to Jewish tradition, the original Temple in Jerusalem was ordained by God, as described in 2 Samuel Chapter 7 when the prophet Nathan tells David:

I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Now, the location for Temple in Jerusalem which would be built by King David's son Solomon was on a site of great significance within the biblical tradition: Mount Moriah.

It was upon that place that Abraham was commanded to bring his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice to his God. His devotion ensured, God saved Isaac and created his covenant with Abraham.

Therefore, this location make perfect sense as Judaism, at this point in its history was a religion of sacrifice to atone for the people's sin, and it was in the Temple that such practices were carried out.

The first temple was constructed under David's son, King Solomon roughly 1000 years before our gospel story took place.

But that one was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire in the year 587 BCE.

So a second temple was built by returning Jewish exiles from Babylon in approximately 70 years later in 515 BCE....and this the one in which today's gospel story today took place.....

It should also be noted that In the decades leading up to Jesus' birth and while he was very young...that this second temple had been greatly expanded and remodeled under King Herod....it became extremely elaborate and would have been largely unrecognizable to Jesus' ancestors.

However, Jesus would have known the temple very well. As an obedient Jew, he would have traveled to the temple at least 3 times year for the high holidays....meaning that by the time Jesus flipped the tables, he had been to the temple a minimum of 90 times in his life....

This wasn't just a place he visited a couple of times....this was the Church of his childhood, his adolescence and his adult life....

No wonder Jesus lashed out in righteous anger when he saw it being abused....

So Now that we have a little history about the temple, what lessons can we take from this story....

First, we learn that God and Jesus are emotionally involved in our world...

What do I mean by that.... I mean that we find in this story Christ's and therefore God's humanity...

We discover here that just as millions of kids going hungry each day makes us sad and angry...God feels that way too...

Just as violence and death in our schools makes us sad and angry...so too does it with God.

This story teaches us that when God became flesh....he wasn't just some sort of emotional-less robot....but he bore all the same sorrow, frustration, anger and stress that we do...

In other words, God knows what you are going through....God isn't removed from the pain we feel....but instead, God is intimately connected to it.

When we pray....when we lift up our burdens to Heaven...we are not just heard....we are empathized with.....God knows what we are going through and cares about it....

Next, the story of Jesus cleanings the temple teaches us that in God's love...even destruction leads to wholeness.

The writer John tells us that after Jesus had driven the profiteers out of the temple, the authorities demanded an explanation from him.

So Jesus gave them a mysterious reply: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." To which The Jewish leaders scoffed, "It

has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?"

Now of course we know, and the disciples later realized, that Jesus was not merely talking about the Temple structure itself, he was also talking about the Temple of his own body. For he would face destruction on the cross, and then would be restored to life on the third day.

John is trying to tell his readers here that the mission and ministry of Jesus, and any who would follow him, will sometimes be marked by destruction, but more importantly in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection there is a promise to us that destruction will never be the final word.

John wants the followers of Christ to know that Resurrection, restoration, forgiveness and new life are the future for those who put their trust in Jesus.

Anyone who has ever remodeled a house knows that in order to bring forth something new there must be a fair measure of destruction.

You see, God's house...the Temple... was the foundation of love for humanity, and it was laid out as a covenant, an agreement understandable by both parties: God would be the people's God; the people were to be God's people, the commandments were spelled out for them through Moses. The building plan was executed with care by God, but unfortunately the human side of the covenant was repeatedly broken...

So, a new building was needed to replace the old. A building that really isn't a building at all.....instead, it is an all-encompassing force of reconciliation for the world...

Through this story, we learn that God calls out our mistakes....flips our tables over but then restores us and surrounds us with rebuilding love.

This brings us to the third and final lesson I think we can take from this story today..... we learn that the temple's scope and place in the world has grown...

In Jesus, we are asked to be part of God's Temple, still based on the foundation of God's love, but with walls upheld not simply by humanity's ability to keep up that side of the covenant or to follow the Ten Commandments.

Now the building is held up with the indestructible Body of Christ... It is unbreakable now because it's already been broken and ridiculed and deserted and betrayed and misunderstood and plotted against and tortured to the limits of humanity...The Temple was destroyed, but love and forgiveness prevailed....and so it was rebuilt bigger and stronger than ever.

Therefore, we are all reconstructed with nothing less than Christ's own body and unending love and life.

The re-construction is life-long process. It involves a daily turning to God and placing our decisions, time, energy, and abilities at God's disposal.

When I was in college, there was a young adult Christian group who had T-shirts made up for their ministry that they wore which proclaimed themselves to be "Under Construction"....and Indeed that's what we all are....

This story teaches us that all who believe Jesus to be the risen Lord are part of the new Temple. In this, God has chosen to build not with bricks and wood and metal, but instead with material much more challenging to mold and shape: human hearts, wills, and understandings.

The Apostle Paul preaches on this very notion in the 17th chapter of the Book of Acts. While he was preaching in Athens, Greece he was brought to a meeting at Mars Hill....where philosophers and the

religious academics asked him about who Jesus was and why he was preaching about him and against all of their temples filled with idols,,,

So Paul says this to them:

²⁴"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.²From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone or as an image made by human design and skill.

Now I know this speech from Paul may not be shocking to us today...but this statement would have been revolutionary in nearly every single country and culture in the ancient world.....

There is a radical shift happening as Jesus' followers began to preach and teach that because of Christ's sacrifice, God is no longer bound by any temple.....God is no longer assessable only at the temple....but God has broken into the entire fabric of the world and in each one of our lives....

When we come and gather together on Sunday mornings to worship, we offer God our thanks for life and to draw strength for living; but we also come to remind ourselves that we are part of an indestructible BODY, the indestructible Temple of God.

This morning, as it is the first Sunday of the month, we will be sharing in the Communion meal together. It was once suggested that when Christians receive communion, we should imagine that God is placing

those portions of the sacrament in the most holy of holies: a special temple....our lives.

May we continue to celebrate the fact that we are the body of Christ. That Christ dwells in us, works through us, and walks with us in our every moment.

There may be times when we experience failure...or we experience destruction...., but as it was for Jesus, God's love will see us through.....may we know that the place that connects us to and reconciles us with one another and with God.....The Temple...will always stand.....Amen and Amen.