Third Sunday in Lent All Saints’ Church

March 4, 2018 Year B

Exodus 20:1-17 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Psalm 19 John 2:13-22

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,

O Lord, our strength and redeemer.

We see a different Jesus this morning. One we’re not use to…

Instead of a Jesus, full of compassion for sinners, forgiving tax-collectors, prostitutes, thieves, and betrayers… Instead of a Jesus, so ready to pour himself out on behalf of all people…

We see Jesus with a full show of impatience, intolerance, anger, zeal and grief…. A man asserting his presence through physical power, through muscle, by making a whip of cords, by pouring out the coins of the money changers, by overturning tables of trade, and by chasing everyone out of the Temple, his Father’s house.

He’s mad! He is chasing out those who are there to ***make expedient*** the sacrifices that are required of the pilgrims. They are cheating and thieving and conniving, thinking they can make a fast buck on the back of God. Jesus drives these folks out.

Yet, in the end, I don’t think Jesus’ anger is rooted with the money-changers. He’s too sympathetic to all our human failings. This overturning of the tables, can’t be just about those running the tables. Those money-changers could easily be any one of us. And Jesus is always forgiving us, all of our individual stories of weaknesses and flaws. Always, continuously, forever.

What makes Jesus so mad, so angry, is the ***religious system*** that allowed those tables to be there in the first place… a system that supports the idea that you can get to God by your own efforts, by your own privilege, and by your own trading. It took a lot of money in Jesus’ day to be compliant to the Law. It took money to be stable; it took time to follow the Law.

If you were trying to survive day by day, you did not have the luxury to keep track of the demands of religious rites. You were an outsider by the sheer force of your poverty. Yet, on the other hand, if you were rich, you had “the right” to take pride in how well you could pull yourself up by your own moral bootstraps. You could define yourself as righteous and blessed, and you could segregate yourself as one of the saved ones, because you could do your duty.

Truth be told: the rituals and the ordinances had become more important than what they were designed to create: mercy, compassion and justice. But for those who profited, that secret wouldn’t be let out of the bag.

Jesus said over and over again that the good life doesn’t look like we think it does. You can obey the religious rules and conform to of all the cultural standards you want, but if you are not listening to the Great Spirit calling you out of yourself into mystery and beauty, your ears are not opened, your eyes cannot see.

False is the idea that perfect observance of the Law is the primary and exclusive path to God.

This insight is not new. Not then, not now. Jesus is just reminding us of something ancient, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, something that all the prophets spoke about: The Law was ***a tool*** in God’s ongoing project of transforming the world in Love. It was not the project itself.

So, Jesus is not angry at the money changers. They are also victims. Jesus is angry because the Temple, his Father’s home, is not a reflection of God’s face.

What is the face of God? Jesus eating with sinners, any and all, gathering the “bad people,” the poor, the hungry, the widows, the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the sojourners, and the money changers together. This is not just about Jesus’ spaciousness, wisdom, kindness and tolerance toward humanity. There’s more. Jesus eats with sinners, mixing with all of humanity, ***as a way*** to express the face of God. This kind of meal is God’s way. And this table, this meal, should be smack in the middle of the Temple.

Yet, if you live within a religious system that honors the rules more than the compassion, then the fear (myth) is if you sit and eat with the bad people, then you too will become bad. Jesus’ audacious act had to drive the religious leaders bonkers. How could Jesus, respected teacher and miracle worker, be flying in the face of ***the only way*** to honor God and the ***best way*** to stay safe and protected in a world that is often fickle, cruel, unfair, unjust, arbitrary; a world that can take away your protection at the drop of a hat.

How many of us would sign up for this ritualistic “clean way of living” if we thought it would protect us from all the evils that can drop out of heaven. Jesus is messing with the tried and true path of protection. In other words, he is exposing our fear and the fear and anxiety of the unknown. No wonder it got him killed.

When I was a young chaplain in the hospital, I became close to a young woman and her family. She wasn’t much older than I was, and she was suffering with some strange ailments, and she was checked in for observation and tests. No one was really worried.

I came in one night, after a long day, to just stop by on my way home, and the family, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, were there all enjoying Chinese take-out. They invited me to eat with them, to take up a chair and be a part of their family. I was hungry, and so I took off my coat and grabbed an open carton of fried rice.

The doctor came in and did a turnabout when he saw the festivities. The dad called after him and pulled the doctor back into the room. We could all see that the doctor’s face was white. He had bad news. Cancer. Inoperable cancer. Everyone began to cry.

I couldn’t get out of that room fast enough. It wasn’t because I couldn’t deal with the grief. Not at all. Rather, it was something about eating with the family. All of a sudden, I felt as if the patient’s newly diagnosed cancer was contagious. That somehow by eating with them, by partaking in their feast, by pulling up a chair to be next to them, to hang out, that I was making myself vulnerable- that I could catch the cancer. Why not? She got it- healthy woman that she was. Why not me? The food was contaminated.

I left. I was in a panic. I really felt as if I had exposed myself to Cancer. I had ingested it. It made no intellectual sense, but the feeling was real. I wanted to wash out my mouth, take a shower, restart the day again, get out of Dodge, pray that I would be ok. I was so afraid. It took me days to get over it.

And I was no different than the religious authorities that were so threatened by Jesus’ invitation for us all to eat together. I was afraid by “mixing” with the family, I had exposed my body to being vulnerable to life’ cruelties. I wanted to protect myself.

It would have been one thing if it was just about Jesus willingness to risk ***only*** his own health to be with sinners and sickness, but no… it’s not just that. He keeps telling us that this eating together has God’s face all over it. God, who has no walls, no boundaries, no differences, no restrictions, no clipboard checking off do’s and don’ts; only open arms with full access to the Loving Source of all Living. And we are to mirror God’s face!

One more point: think about the Temple Jesus is protecting as being your temple… your soul. Your inner sanctuary. Jesus is there to protect (ruthlessly) any of those who dare to come in and mess with Jesus’ image of God. Whoever comes traipsing in to corrupt and take over… those wily ones who think they can set the table of our lives, convincing us that God wants us to live in perfection, do all the right things, complete all the right gestures, fulfill all the societal norms. Then we are protected and saved. Jesus is angry because our very soul is being played and God’s very name is being taken in vain.

When you receive communion, remember that we now have Jesus forever as the Christ. In that tiny piece of bread and that tiny sip of wine, we are seated within everyone’s temple, next to our brothers and sisters, every one of them, with our eyes wide open to their beauty and dignity. A glorious table set just for us by God’s intimate love. AMEN.