

EMBRACING GOD'S WISDOM

Lent 3 – Cycle B: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Pastor Dan Nighswander, leading our seminary class on the Gospel of Matthew, wondered aloud one day about the meaning of Jesus' so-called cleansing of the temple at Jerusalem. "I don't understand why this was an issue for Jesus," he said. "Part of the temple courtyard was devoted to a market where pilgrims could buy animals for ritual sacrifice; farmers and merchants were the traditional business people you would expect to find there. It was not something that had recently sprung up; it supported the devotion of the people." "And Jesus' overturning a few tables would have been a minor skirmish in an area that was so vast. Who would have noticed? Why does Matthew even bother reporting it?"

Interestingly, all four gospels report the incident. Matthew and Luke give account that it happened, but make no comment on it; no explanation other than Jesus' quotation of fragments of scripture from Isaiah and Jeremiah that suggest Jesus was unhappy with the whole temple culture. He may well have been, of course, but the violence involved and the focus on the merchants is a misdirected criticism. Only Mark, connects the ruckus Jesus caused with increasing the desire of the chief priests and scribes to do away with him.

It could be that John asked himself the same questions Dan asked when he considered the account of the cleansing of the temple. Interestingly, John is more skillful than Matthew, Mark, and Luke in explaining that Jesus was offended by the presence of a market in the actual temple itself, not the outer courts, but then quickly turns the story into a springboard for Jesus' prophesying his death and resurrection. John relates that Jesus' mention of the temple's destruction and restoration is a metaphor that the disciples would later remember. This comment about their future memory suggests that John received this part of the account first-hand. And it is a teaching of Jesus that illustrates for John's readers Jesus' understanding of the unfolding drama of God's plan of salvation. So many times in John's gospel, we see him recast the story of Jesus as God's liturgy for saving the world from the power of sin and death; and John's comment in today's reading about "the temple of [Jesus'] body" is characteristic of how John seeks to communicate two levels of meaning in a single narrative.

Perhaps it is John's more serious approach to telling Jesus' story that explains the cleansing of the temple not so much as Jesus' offence at trade and commerce, but more his offence at how often faith is trivialized by religion and its institutions. If we are *all* caught up in the unfolding drama of God's plan of salvation, and the proclamation of our baptism would certainly encourage us in that understanding, it is easy to see how focussing on our institutional life as church could frustrate Jesus. Certainly, all the gospels suggest that the institutionalization of the Hebrew faith, especially the temple at Jerusalem with its religious hierarchy and highly regulated worship, was light years away from the Ten Words Moses received on Mount Sinai. Where is the simple elegance of, as Jesus put it, "loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and loving our neighbour as ourselves?" Is God's wisdom present in how we, in our time and place, express our devotion to God?

Almost two years ago, our congregation began a process of self-examination on our life and ministry. A number of years of balanced budgets and gradual growth had left us with the question, "Are we doing all that we can do?" "Is our mission clear?" "Do we have a vision for ministry that enables the proclamation of the gospel?" It was an excellent process we undertook, and it resulted in raising our consciousness concerning how the love of Christ is present for others in the community beyond our doors. I would say that we became inspired by our call to mission, and last year, 2011, we actually forgot about our institutional needs for a few months, and had to recoup our losses with an end-of-year campaign to resuscitate our Operating Fund. It wasn't really the best way to do ministry, but the financial crisis was a good learning experience for us. We discovered we could do more than we had ever done before in ministry for others, and essentially it removed much of the anxiety we had concerning our purpose as a congregation. We really could be in mission for others; we were not weighed down by institutional concerns.

Jesus' teaching about death and resurrection and Paul's interpretation of death and resurrection is all about God's wisdom; that the simple elegance of the gospel is all about how well we love one another and how willing we are to place our faith in God. Today's three readings call us to embrace God's wisdom, to walk the way of the cross with Jesus, and to trust in God's power to be present for us every

step of the way. It is the good news for us as a community, and for us as individuals in community. And faithful discipleship, Jesus teaches, is not only about embracing God's wisdom, it is also about embodying God's wisdom.