

“Angry And Indignant”

- I. Introduction. What Jumps Out at You from Today’s Gospel? We’re going to do something a little different today. First, I’d like to pose a question for you to consider. What jumps out at you from today’s Gospel? Take a minute to underline the word or words from today’s Gospel that do stand(s) out to you. If you don’t have a pencil, use one of the pew pencils. We’re going to explore how the Holy Spirit speaks to us through today’s Gospel.

Today we are witnesses to Jesus’ actions in the Temple. The Lord was angry, outspoken, and aggressive. If you worked as a money changer or a sold animals for sacrifice, it was definitely not a good day for you. Jesus came into the temple and saw merchants hawking their wares; he became incensed, turned over money tables, scattered animal cages, chased off the vendors with a whip, and condemned them verbally. Jesus the Prophet was fired up, and today we are witnesses.

- II. This is the Third Sunday of Lent. The widely read Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann said that “Above all lent is a spiritual journey and its destination is Easter.” Why do you think we have met the Prophet Jesus today on our way to Easter, the angry Jesus, the Jesus who disregarded danger to himself to challenge evil? I believe that we have met the Prophet Jesus because he has something to teach us; it’s our challenge to figure out what that is for each of us.

One of the time-honored ways to study and inwardly digest Scripture is to select a section, such as today’s gospel, and read it several times, letting ourselves hear different things each time and meditate on the passage. We also ask the Holy Spirit to bring the Scripture alive to us. One way of exploring a passage is to consider the reactions of different people in the Scripture story and to reflect on how we might have reacted had we been there. Each character has a point of view and a reaction to what is happening. We listen, reflect, and then apply the Scripture story to ourselves.

- III. The Second Reading and the Reflection: A. I’m going to read this passage to you again; this time from a contemporary translation of the Bible called The Message. You can close your eyes if you like in order to better concentrate on the story. Ask yourself with whom you identify. [read John 2:13-22 a second time]

Who are you most like in this story? Do you identify with the Jewish leaders? The people selling their wares? The people buying from them? The others in the crowd? The disciples? With Jesus himself? Take a minute and jot down with whom you most fully identify. Let's talk briefly about the people in the story.

1. First the Jewish leaders: John did not directly identify the Jewish leaders. They were present in the same story told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and were so enraged that from that day on they were determined to kill Jesus. You see they had a racket going – every Jewish male had to pay a temple tax each year at Passover. The common Roman and Greek coins couldn't be used, the temple wouldn't accept them. So the people had to exchange their coins for temple coins and the rate of exchange was exorbitant. The people, particularly the poor, were boxed in by this scam. In addition to the temple tax, worshipers needed to bring or buy a sacrifice. It is thought that the Jewish leaders increased their take by 100% through this second scam. The very poor, for example, sacrificed doves that usually cost about 15c a piece. Yet in the temple courtyard, doves cost \$15.00. The temple priests kept an animal herd in an inner courtyard. If worshipers brought their own sacrificial animals, the priest had to approve them. But they usually didn't -- they found a blemish somewhere and then required people to an animal or dove sold at the temple at great cost. These scams worked -- the leaders were getting rich and saw Jesus as a threat to their operation.
2. What about the salespeople? These were the folks on the front-line. Their job was to hawk their wares and turn the profits over to the temple priests. People in such positions often say, "Hey, I'm just trying to earn a living. I'm only following orders, so don't blame me if people are being cheated." They were probably confused and frightened by Jesus' actions, thinking that they might be blamed and would have to clean up the mess.
3. What about the Jewish crowd? The crowd included those who were doing business with the crooked vendors. They probably questioned where Jesus got the authority to do what he did. They didn't know Jesus or understand his mission, and many were offended by his actions. Those in the crowd didn't quite get this whole Jesus thing, especially when he began to turn things upside down. Seomtimes, that's similarly difficult for us to understand as well.
4. What about the disciples? No doubt the disciples were caught by surprise and thought Jesus was making a terrible public relations move. Perhaps they were embarrassed to be with Jesus. But unlike the crowd, they did start to understand the spiritual meaning of what was happening. Jesus was the Messiah, and he was "consumed by zeal for his father's house." Do you identify with the disciples – embarrassed by this angry Jesus, but seeing glimpses that he is the Messiah, your Messiah, doing what he needed to do?

5. And finally, what about Christ? He was essentially alone in the Temple, raising a ruckus, overturning tables, shouting, and my goodness, cracking a whip! Our Lord took on the power structure because he knew what they were doing was wrong. He named evil – evil that used the house of God, his Father, to rob people. Are we like Jesus, naming evil and trying to turn it on its head even though we know there will be a huge cost? Who do we identify with -- The Jewish leaders and the temple priests, the sales people, the crowd including those buying sacrificial animals and doves, the disciples, or Christ?

IV. Conclusion. Most likely those of here this morning would like to say that we identify with Jesus in his anger and indignation at the exploitation of the poor. But the season of Lent, particularly in the spring of 2009, is a time to ask ourselves whether actions reflect such an identification. Might our focus or preoccupation with meeting our own needs dull our concern and indignation at the social injustice beyond our walls? I do believe that our concern about ourselves over time, particularly at periods of anxiety and worry, can mute and dampen our deep commitment as Christians to addressing the suffering in the world around us. As I prepared for this sermon, I was reminded how much that suffering has increased. The parish ran an ad to hire a part-time sexton. So far there have been at least 49 responses, only one of whom has relevant experience. Others are unemployed college graduates and professionals who also desperately need work.

To the credit of Ascension, our long-standing commitment to ministries such as FISH, Family Promise, and the Volunteer Ministry Center, is well established. My hope for future together is that our commitments to the needs of others will not only grow, but also diversify to commitments not only locally, but globally. And I know from your responses to the recent parish survey, that many of you share this vision. Your positive response to the Bolivian mission trip is a tangible expression of this. I pray that we will be increasingly indignant when others are hurt and exploited throughout the world and compassionate in our response. For your further reflection this coming week, I repeat the question that I began with this morning: What is the Holy Spirit saying to you through our Gospel passage on this the Third Sunday of Lent? Amen.