

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Third Sunday in Lent  
8 March 2015

Scripture readings:

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalms 19

I Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

In the Gospel reading for today Jesus says, "*Don't make of my house a marketplace.*" However, there are enough people employed at Dutch's market from this congregation and I encounter enough people in the aisles there that I think this church could take place at Dutch's. I've often said we should say mass in the cracker aisle midweek. *[laughter]*

This is an extraordinary lesson of Jesus being angry. We often don't think of Jesus as really furious, but he's madder than the proverbial wet hen today. And his behaviors betray the depth of his anger. He hurts no one, but he does have something to do with the things that they are using as religious vehicles and devices, and he says something very, very, very radical. You know these days we're used to hearing things like the Department of Homeland Security that listen to all of the chatter in the electronic media to hear when anybody says, "*We will destroy...fill in the blank.*" They are immediately suspect and there is, of course, no patience for that kind of thinking or speech, and our society is getting ever more conservative about permitting those ideas to be expressed.

Well, here's Jesus in his own day talking to these people who have spent huge money, huge effort, a long time to create a house for God, a residence in the middle of Jerusalem, a place, a location for the Almighty. And they have set themselves up as the interlocutors. That's not only a word that was used in minstrels, you know, but the person who speaks in between, the translators, if you will, or the telephone operators. You remember the old movies from the 40s with the girls with the headsets and the wires. The telephone operators between poor sinners and Almighty God. They not only had the technique, the answer to your problem, the ability to establish the communication between you and God, they also could sell that to you.

This was understood to be a religious place. Those behaviors were understood to be religious behaviors. And that's what essentially the church in that day was. It based its existence on what we read in the scripture today, on the Ten Commandments where God in Exodus provides these rules for living in relationship to God and in relationship to each other. And somehow religious organization, religious society, clergy, religious people over the ages developed these ideas of what religion involved. And somewhere along the line somebody got the idea that God was angry and could be made happy if somebody burnt the beef or immolated the chicken or took the life of an animal or sacrificed this or bought that.

Jesus is not unfamiliar with that religious behavior. It's in his life from the very first day. You may remember on Groundhog's Day, the second of February, the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin forty days after Christmas, the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. Mary and Joseph take Jesus and buy some turtledoves to sacrifice when they present Jesus to the priest Simeon and the priestess Anna in the temple. Their turtledove sacrifice was the sacrifice that poor people could afford. They couldn't do a whole cow or a lamb or a sheep so they had a

substitute, a cheaper way out...or was it a way *in* to God.

All of those ideas are based on the idea that God is an angry old man in the sky with a bunch of rules which if you violate the rules, he *really* gets angry and then your job is to make him happy by buying him off with some kind of religious behavior or sacrifice or investment. Of course the more money you put into it the happier God gets. Right? God uses our exchange and uses dollars and cents for his affection. That's why we have names for all of these windows, isn't it? When we give gifts we put our names on the end. We don't want to be forgotten. That's also part of it.

Jesus goes into the temple in his adulthood and he sees all of this stuff going on, and he's finally had it up to his molars. He's finished with his sense of religion being co-opted by a hierarchy, a religious organization, an institution and a building that says, "*This is the way God loves...well really the way God **hates** people, and people are encouraged to cajole God into favoring them.*" He's had enough, and he knows nobody can hear him so he does what is audible. He makes an example. He spills the money on the floor, he overturns the tables, he lets the animals go, and he says essentially, "*Get the hell out of here! You've missed the point. This, you say, is God's house. What does this have to do with a God who loves what God creates?*" He says, "*I don't understand religion as the business of jollificating an angry God. I don't think religion has anything to do with a kind of sacrifice that means taking the life of an animal or another human being [although he's going to be that sacrifice, isn't he, in very short order] because that's their only way of understanding religion - something has to pay for something else. It has to be a contract. This is bad; that makes it good. This is wrong; this makes up for the wrong. This is sin; this is redemption.* And he says, "*Get out of here! That's not how I see it. God's love is not purchasable. It is freely, fully and eternally available and always has been since the first day of creation.*"

And Jesus says this, I'm fully convinced, acknowledging his understanding of God's love for the people who have it all wrong. And those, by the way, in this piece of scripture are the religious people, the priests, the *high* priests, the managers of the temple, the sellers of the sacrifice. You know the business of money changers in the temple. There was specific money just for the temple. Anybody who's traveled in Europe knows what it used to be like. You'd go 50 miles into another country and you'd change money and get another kind of money. Every time you change money you lose money. The person who changes it for you and helps you out, is the person who makes money by taking your wrong money and making it into right money. So temple money had money changers, and they were making it left and right. The temple was an extraordinary source of income and revenue. They did better, I'm sure, than *Dutch's* on a snowy weekend [*laughter*] and they never ran out of milk or bread!

So Jesus sees this and sees this being called religion and sees religious people selling to others the idea that God's affection can be purchased and must be accessed in their way, and he says, "*No! I've had enough of it. Stop! Get the hell out of here!*" Because it *was* hell. It was *not* heaven. What was being taught to people as this is where God lives was precisely the opposite. God wasn't in the midst of that mess. And God's commandments didn't look like what they turned into by that time either, did they? Respectful ways of living with each other and the encouragement of worshiping a true and living God who creates the whole world.

By the way, this morning we read the argument for God resting on the seventh day, the

argument for the Sabbath. Is that the only argument for the Sabbath in scripture? There is another one. Do you remember what it was? At the time of Passover, to remember the liberation from Egypt, the Sabbath should be observed. That's just an aside.

But the point is this: Jesus doesn't just destroy the religious structure of his day or attempt to challenge it. He provides a living, loving alternative which says, and it's not a new idea, it's in the Psalms:

*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,  
the world and those who live in it. (Psalm 24:1)*

There is Jesus saying, *"That's religion - the belief that God loves whom God creates, and God will care for them, and there is nothing you can buy, nothing that you need to do for God to be encouraged to love you."* What we need to do is encourage ourselves and each other to believe that we *are* loved by God from the beginning - fully, completely, sufficiently and therefore encouraged to live as those who are loved, not as those who are frightened, as those who are convinced and confident of God's love, not those who are groveling to get it and scraping to pay for it. And that changes our relationship, not only with God, but with the rest of the world. And so Jesus says, *"Get out of here!" That's not religion and this is not the temple of God."*

Well, he needs to answer what the temple of God is. I think anybody's easy understanding of the temple is a place where divinity lives. And then he offers the suggestion that he can rebuild the temple in three days, and they're really horrified. Horrified that one person could take all of that effort and money and self-righteousness and pride in a beautiful place and overweening arrogance of the ownership of God and understanding of how God works and who God includes and, more importantly, who God excludes, and Jesus says it's all garbage. It's amazing how we love the thing, the temple itself. To this very day, two thousand years later, people go to Jerusalem to the last standing wall of the temple, the last few stones left on top of each other, to pray and put their prayers in the cracks. You know what I'm talking about. We love the thing and forget about the living God.

And Jesus says the living God chooses to live in this world but you cannot house him in a building. You will find the living God living inside the tent of human flesh which is held up with the tent poles of the human skeleton, and there and there alone will God be found in the world. And that's what we just celebrated in Christmas - the incarnation, the business of God coming into flesh in the person of Jesus. But that's not the end of the incarnation; that's the beginning. The business of living in human flesh is the business of where God's temple is in the world, and Jesus says you can spend all the money you like, you can figure out all of the theological structures you want, you can convince people that they have to buy doves, cows, sheep, goats, and all the rest of it to make God happy, and he says that's not it. We've missed the point. God is happy. God is never unhappy with what God creates, and God has created *you*.

Now it must have been difficult for Jesus to look at those whose tables and money boxes and animals he was turning over and letting loose and love them as well. But if anybody could and anybody did, Jesus did. And the story does not indicate that Jesus did any bodily harm to anybody. He took on the things that they were in love with and said, *"Skip it! God is in love with you, and you are being asked, invited, encouraged, cajoled and welcomed to fall in love with*

*God. You don't have to change God's heart because God's heart is the same, always has been. The only heart that has to change is yours."* There are no hoops, there is no money, there are no regulations. It is simply believing that God's love is for you and for everyone else in the world, and it is full, it is complete, it is from the beginning, and it is efficacious.

So what's our business, then, as religious people? Not so much to go to the temple as it is to *be* the temple, which is why we gather here to remind ourselves that we carry the living God in, with and among us as we gather and personally. And that's why we come to the sacrament every week to receive the body of the spirit and the blood, the flesh of God into the flesh of humanity so that where we go God can come with us. That is not something we deserve, but a gift that God gives us. Because if we have to deserve or earn it, we're lost. Period. That's the end of the story. If we don't think we're lost we're way far down the road to hypocrisy thinking that we *have* earned or merited it. We know what hypocrisy smells like and it's easy to detect. That's like a dead salmon in a safe deposit box in the bank. You may not see it but you know it's there. *[laughter]*

So Jesus is angry at the misappropriation of religion. Jesus is angry at the abuse of poor people whose money is being taken on false pretenses. Jesus is upset that people have misconstrued the love of God, and Jesus knows that he is going to have to prove this by allowing the world to do to him what it will do - which is assassinate him - because the truth is so painfully simple and so beautifully honest that the religious institutions, the social institutions, the cultural institutions and the political institutions as well as the financial institutions cannot stand that kind of Gospel. They can't because they are founded on personal advantage, selfishness, greed, gain and all the rest of it. So Jesus says, *"Get out of here. This is not the house of God."* The house of God is a place where people pray to a God who has given them what they need and come together with each other to allow God to live in their community so that God might be incarnate, enfleshed and be alive in the world.

I do believe that Jesus gives us the message that there is one sacrifice that God will accept and only one. It's the one thing that you have that God didn't give you, and it's the only thing that God can take from you that will make it possible for God to occupy you. Sin. So the only thing that we have that God doesn't have, the only thing that we have that God didn't give us, is that part of ourselves which says, *"We are self-sufficient. We can do this by ourselves. We can do our religion. We are in love with our sin. We are in love with our things."*

We like to build temples and ignore the fact that God creates the most extraordinary temple at the time of every human conjugation, when a sperm and an egg unite and a temple is built for the Almighty God. And that takes place all over the world all the time. And that's called love. And so in Lent and as we go through the rest of the weeks of Lent it's our opportunity to think about falling less in love with our sin and more in love with God, about making the sacrifice of our sin to God which means we leave an open space inside of us which God can fill. And when God has filled us and become incarnate in us as much as in Jesus, then God will be better known, better understood, and more perfectly worshiped in the world today.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen