

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Third Sunday in Lent
4 March 2018

Scripture readings:

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

This is a challenging gospel because I think it's an invitation for us to believe that there is a violent streak in Jesus. He makes a whip out of cords and he uses it. But listen again to these words: *"Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle."* Now I imagine he used the whip as a cattle prod. There is no indication that he used the whip to attack people. There is no indication that he wrought harm on anyone. But he certainly engaged in the business of upsetting their religious practices. And what's the problem with their religious practices? Well, I don't think it's a mistake that the first lesson this morning lays out for us the Fourteen Commandments. Oh, I got the number wrong! *[laughter]* There are fewer than that. That should make it easier, right?

Here is this ancient tradition in the life of the Church about how we as people ought to relate to God and to each other. Simple guidelines for behavior and constructing organizations - the social contract. At the time of the Reformation there was discussion about how the law, the Decalogue, etc. should be used. There was a discussion about the third use of the law. Well, what are the first two? The first use of the law is that it can be used to establish civil government and how to run a country and a society and all the rest of it. The second use of the law is that the law condemns. If the law is read correctly and critically and honestly, it will inform us that we are, in fact, sinners. We are by nature sinful and unclean. We don't live up to very ordinary standards for everybody in the world. The Ten Commandments make sense anywhere you go. You'd find it hard to find somebody who doesn't agree with this stuff. But the third use of the law was one that engaged the imagination of the reformers. They were opposed to using the law as a way to justify oneself before God, that if I obey the laws, I live up to these standards, I am better than those who don't. That's not an unfamiliar idea to us, is it? We like to see ourselves as those who obey the law - at least better than those who don't obey the law worse than we imagine ourselves to do.

But there is this great hesitation - at least since the time of the Reformation - to use the law that way. But apparently Jesus encounters that in the temple in the lesson we read this morning from John. I am going to say this, especially when we get to the part about the doves. Doesn't it make you wonder why that gets so much attention? *"Take these things out of here,"* he said to those who were selling the doves. *"Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"* I imagine he was saying... You all know what birds do... *"Stop making my Father's house into a shit hole!"*

And why were those things there? They were there because somebody got the crazy idea that God's affection was purchasable. And it was purchasable by the investment of money into animals to be sacrificed, into incense to be burned, into all kinds of extraordinary behaviors to keep oneself clean. That was the object of this kind of religion, to keep oneself pure. To hell with the rest of the world, but if I am good and pure and buy God's affection, God will love me, and I can get myself into heaven by what I do, what I buy, what I pay for. And we get into these discussions about what counts. It's this purchase of affection by my behavior. And I think Jesus finally gets frustrated because his relationship with God has nothing to do with a contract, nothing to do with what he owes God. And you know when you start to go down that road, then you come up with the idea that God owes you something. We've all said it, haven't we? *"Why do I deserve this? What did I do wrong to have to put up with this problem? God owes me better because I go to church, I tithe, I don't cuss."* For the Baptists and the Methodists, *"I don't drink."* We all have our things that make us holier and better than thou. *"I have a perfect theology. I'm a Lutheran. You can't knock us down theologically. We've got it all worked out. We're good."* It's all the same garbage.

And Jesus finally uses a prod to get the animals out of the temple, releases the doves who are crapping all over the place, upsets the moneychangers and asks people to consider their religious premises which are the arguments on which they're basing this kind of religion. Now don't get me wrong, friends. I think we do this all the time in probably subtler ways, and we get sucked into this left and right. That's why we have to practice our religion, to return to Jesus and let him chase our sacrificial animals out of our temples and challenge us on the use of our money as a modicum of exchange for the affection of the Almighty.

Jesus does not understand his relationship with God as contractual but as personal and relational. He believes

God to be his Creator, his progenitor and his lover. And in the kind of candid honesty that typifies Jesus, Jesus teaches us that if we can join him in that belief, then we also have to join him in the belief that if God can love me, God can love my worst enemy - and, in fact, does!

And so the Ten Commandments can't be used as a way to justify ourselves - the third use of the law - but they can inform us of how short we come up. They can help organize our societies and governments, and they can invite us to reconsider, as religious people, what our relationship with God ought to look like. And that ought to inform our sense of what our relationship with other people ought to look like, especially with those with whom we disagree.

And so it was when Gandhi was organizing his folks in India, he encouraged them to believe that if they grasped and held on to the truth, that would be all they needed to do. And of course they challenged him and he said, "*You might end up in jail.*" And they said, "*We've never been in one of these jails.*" And of course he said, "*Look, you will get abused for grasping the truth, for believing the truth, for thinking about God this way. You will be beaten for that.*" And he said, "*They might even kill me for that, but all they'll get from that is my dead body. They won't get my cooperation with their programs of injustice and hatred and fear and ignorance and temporal power. And they will have to deal with the fact that I died for truth.*"

And that's exactly what Jesus is preparing to do today. He's speaking the truth to power. He's speaking religious truth to the Church, political truth to government, moral truth to society. And he's not seen as loveable for that, but he moves from here, and we'll get there in a couple weeks on Palm Sunday. He moves from this radical act which is not an act of violence - let's make that clear - to another act which mocks the most expressive act of empire, victory, force in the world when emperors ride into a city in triumph with horses and chariots and arrows and spears and guns and cannons with that extraordinary military parade which can tear up Pennsylvania Avenue, an act of absolute declaration of my guns are bigger than your guns. And instead of riding a steed and all the rest of it, Jesus hops on a jackass covered with rags and has his way carpeted with palms. You know that's a dangerous act because he's mocking the emperor, he's mocking the government, he's mocking the system, and saying God's ways are different from yours. And he is not shaken from holding on to that truth, and I think if the whip in today's gospel is symbolic of any kind of power, it's an indication to us that if Jesus wanted to, he could have shot them all into tomorrow, but didn't because it would have negated the truth that he held on to. You know how he got mocked: "*If you are the Christ, bring yourself down from the cross.*" Other theologians will tell you he could have, but didn't.

So here we have this extraordinary business of Jesus challenging the world with a different view of God. Simply put, I think that view is this: All of religion which is accommodating society and culture and economies and all the rest of it - all of that religion was worried about whether or not God was pleased with them. Does it count? Have I paid? Did I do the right thing? Is my behavior correct? Am I clean? Am I kosher? Did I eat the right things, do the right things, cut my hair the right way, wear the right kind of clothing, pay the right amount of money? Did I do it right to make God love me? And Jesus says that's a cockamammy idea. It has nothing to do with God loving you. Of course God loves you! You are God's child. God created you and God created everybody else in the world and God loves everybody in the world. The question of religion is do you believe in that kind of God? Are you happy with God, not is God happy with you. Are we happy with a God who creates the whole world? Are we happy with a God who creates a world that is able to sustain itself? Are we happy with a God who creates a world that can feed itself? Are we happy with a God who creates a world in which men and women are created equal? "*In the beginning created He them male and female. In His own image created He them.*" Are we happy with that kind of God who loves our enemies the way we love the kind of people we know and love best? Are we happy with God - not is God happy with us?

And it's a tough one because God is bigger than our prejudices, our ignorances, our societies, our churches, our fears. And God is love - period. Now you could almost say from memory with me 1 Corinthians 13 - *Love is patient, love is kind...* There's an understanding that we all own generally of what love is about, and it has to do with caring for each other, respecting each other, loving the world, sharing the wealth, and advocating for those who are left out - the poor, the naked, the sick, the homeless - because we believe in a God who creates a world that can manage all of that and intends to and asks us not to keep ourselves clean but to get ourselves dirty in doing that. That's a whole backward concept of kosher. It's a whole backward concept of religion. Not is God happy with us but are we happy with God? And the questions are there for us to answer.

Now I think I said it last week, but I really am enjoying this idea. And there's probably a variation of this story, but it's good enough for our purposes here. Eventually when Gandhi was asked why he didn't become a Christian, he said, "*I would be glad to if you could introduce me to one.*" Gandhi, like Jesus, like Martin Luther King, Jr. who studied Gandhi - are all people who had an idea about the possibilities in the world against all odds. Who would think that the little brown man in a loincloth without a single firecracker would get the entire British empire the hell out of India by speaking the truth and holding on to the truth at great personal sacrifice - but it worked!

Same thing for Jesus - at great personal sacrifice. I don't care, frankly, whether or not you believe Jesus was God. I really don't. I think the important thing is do you believe what Jesus said. And if we think about what Jesus said and what Gandhi said and what Martin Luther King, Jr. said, it doesn't matter. They said, spoke, held on to and grasped the truth and would not be swayed from it. It ain't easy, friends. Let's be honest. Allegedly, Einstein said something about very seldom in this world will you encounter a person like Gandhi. He himself who knew great things about physics and science and all the rest of it, knew enough about humanity to know that this is unusual in human beings. But that is why we come here to gather around and celebrate the human being Jesus the Christ and remember his grasp of God's love for us, and for all people everywhere. This is why we take forty days in Lent to consider that truth, and may it encourage us in our own grasp of the truth.

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