

Lent 03 B 2015
March 8, 2015 :: Exodus 20:1-17 & John 2:13-22
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“God’s Single-minded Jealousy and Zeal.”

To some extent, all sermon preparation is like taking a journey. And like every journey, you head off in a particular direction, hoping for a particular destination. This past week, when I began preparing for this sermon, I thought I would be preaching on our gospel reading— because that’s basically what I almost always preach on. Therefore, I didn’t expect that my research into our gospel would actually take me into a different direction entirely. And so, what I want to do this morning is to briefly share with you a part of that journey, and what I learned from it.

So, the first thing I did was to take a really close look at our gospel reading. It’s a story that has become known as The Cleansing of the Temple. It’s a story that’s contained in all four gospels, which tells us it was a significant story for the early church.

Now, even though I’ve long been aware of this story, and of its importance, something I’d never really done before with this

story was to ask the question “Why?” Why was it so important? I think I always just assumed that it was included to provide context for the distrust and hostility that the Jewish religious leaders felt towards Jesus.

But this past week, I finally got around to asking “Why?” but the answer I got wasn’t what I expected. But before I get to that, some explanation about what’s going in our gospel reading will be helpful.

The Jews had three annual religious festivals which required a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And while all those Jewish families were in Jerusalem, many of them would visit the Temple to present an animal to be sacrificed for their sins. However, those sacrificial animals that were being presented had to be perfect, free of any of blemish or defect.

If you were lucky enough to own your animals, you could bring one of them for the sacrifice; assuming, that is, that it passed inspection at the Temple. But if you didn’t own any animals, or the one you brought didn’t pass inspection, you could purchase an animal from one of the animal vendors located at the Temple.

However, you couldn't use ordinary money to purchase an animal; rather, you had to go to one of the money changers and exchange your ordinary money for Temple money.

On a good day, the animal inspectors were unbiased, the money changers gave you a fair rate of exchange, and the animal vendors had reasonable prices for their animals. However, in our gospel reading when Jesus enters the Temple, it was apparently not a good day. Although the text doesn't specify, we're probably safe assuming that some unscrupulous merchants were taking advantage of people who were simply trying to fulfill their religious obligations.

And so, when Jesus sees this taking place, he erupts in a physical and emotional outburst wherein he drives out the animal vendors, he overturns the tables of the money changers, and he accuses them all of turning the Temple into a marketplace. It's all very dramatic stuff.

But it's also very heroic; after all, there's Jesus protecting the honor of the Temple, and defending the purity of the sacrificial system, and ensuring the dignity of the worship of God.

But when I got to this point in my research, I wasn't sure what more I could make of this story. So I did something I haven't tried in a long time: I laid out the four versions of this story next to each other, and I compared their similarities and their differences. And that's when I saw something I hadn't noticed before: John's version (and that's what we heard this morning) included something that didn't appear in the others, and it was this phrase:

“His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

“Zeal for your house will consume me.” When I saw that phrase, I wanted to know more about it, and so I did some research and this is what I learned:

“Zeal for your house will consume me” is a quote from Psalm 69:9. Therefore, and as it appears in our gospel reading, it's an English translation of a Greek translation of a Hebrew phrase. So I researched the words in that original Hebrew phrase, and everything seemed pretty innocuous except for the word “zeal.” The Hebrew word which was ultimately translated into English as

“zeal” occurred in other places in the Old Testament, where it was variously translated into English as: jealousy, zeal, anger, and envy.

But since that wasn’t especially helpful, I decided to look at those other passages where that word is used, and that’s where my journey took me in a decidedly different direction.

Long story short: As it turns out, our Hebrew word for “zeal” shares the exact same root, and is nearly identical in meaning to another Hebrew word that appears in our reading from Exodus; a word which is translated into English as “jealous.”

Finally, I knew I was getting somewhere when I realized that the Hebrew word for “zeal” in “Zeal for your house will consume me” has almost the exact same meaning as the word “jealous” in our reading from Exodus, where God says “You shall not bow down to [any idols] or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.”

I immediately wanted to know more about this word “jealous,” so I turned to my trusty Hebrew Lexicon and Bible Dictionary, and this is what I learned:

In the Old Testament, jealousy is the emotion of single-minded devotion.

When turned inward, jealousy produces hatred or envy of others.

But when it is turned outward, jealousy produces an overpowering zeal that leads to total selflessness.

But what came next turned out to be really important for my journey:

However, when we’re talking specifically about God, jealousy is the principle of God’s protection of his people.

Let me say that again: When we're talking about God, jealousy is the principle of God's protection of his people.

In other words, the thought foremost Jesus' mind as he walks into that Temple, and the thought foremost in God's mind as he issues the Ten Commandments, *are essentially the same thing*. What we are seeing in both stories are expressions of God's single-minded devotion to protect his people!

I never expected to find that, and I thought it was very cool. However, two questions arose from that discovery.

First, in our gospel reading, who *is* Jesus protecting? Is he, as I first thought, protecting the religious establishment? No! In fact, he's protecting people *from* the religious establishment; and specifically, from those members of the religious establishment who would take advantage of the "average person in the pew."

And then, the second question that arose was this: How are The Ten Commandments an expression of God's single-minded devotion to the protection of his people?

In order to answer that question, we have to ask another question, “Why?”

For example, why does the first commandment tell us that we are to have no other gods? Perhaps, it’s because if God alone is on the altar of our life, then other things— like money, sex, and power— cannot also be there, and thus be available for us to use to exploit others.

Or, why does the fourth commandment tell us to set aside one day each week to do absolutely nothing? Is it really so bad if we mow the grass on the Sabbath? Or if we balance the checkbook? No! So what’s the problem? Who are we hurting? Maybe ourselves. Because, if we never set aside a day *to be human beings instead of human doings*, we’ll forget that life, and creation, and family are gifts to be enjoyed and cherished. And if we forget that, we may be tempted to take them for granted.

Now, I’ve just mentioned two of the commandments, and there are eight more. But this is an exercise that we can all do. All you have to do is sit down with family or friends, and go through the commandments one by one, and give each person the chance

to ask the question Why? Why did God give us this teaching? Why should we not lie? Why should we honor father and mother? Why is this teaching important in my life as an individual? and in our life together as a family or community?

Now, I don't have time to tell you why I think each *individual* commandment is important, but I will tell you why I think this *collection* of commandments is important: It's important because it provides us with a way to live. And it's a way to live that offers us the best hope for a life that is satisfying and fulfilling. And it's a way to live that's guided by the wisdom and love of God.

In his best-selling book *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell talks about this way of living, when he writes:

“As a Christian, I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live ... I'm convinced being generous is a better way to live. I'm convinced forgiving people and not carrying around

bitterness is a better way to live. I'm convinced having compassion is a better way to live. I'm convinced pursuing peace in every situation is a better way to live. I'm convinced listening to the wisdom of others is a better way to live. I'm convinced being honest with people is a better way to live. This way of thinking isn't weird or strange; it is simply acknowledging that everybody follows somebody, and I'm trying to follow Jesus."

As I come to the end of my remarks, I'm struck by the fact that two of our Bible readings have exposed us to a side of God's personality that many of us miss. And it's not God as the moral bookkeeper, who keeps a list of all our sins; that side probably never really existed. And it's not God as the cosmic mousetrap, waiting to spring upon us whenever we make a mistake; that side probably never really existed either.

But it is the side of God's personality that is profoundly concerned with the way we live. And to help us find the best life possible, God provides us with plenty of teachings and

directions— and not only in the Ten Commandments, but also in the rest of scripture.

Obviously, we're free to try other ways, and listen to other teachers, and follow other paths. But I believe God is confident that, given time, all of us will eventually return to him, and to his Son, Jesus, who is, as it turns out, "the way, the truth, and the life."

Amen.