

Advent 1/21/18 “Cleansing of the Temple”

When Jesus and his disciples stood looking down the broad avenue supported on huge stone arches 250 feet above the Tyropean Valley, they were looking at one of the great wonders of the ancient world! It was a building of surpassing glory! Surrounding the Royal Porch were three rows of Corinthian columns twenty-five feet tall, carved out single blocks of pure white marble. The exterior walls of the temple were sheathed in gold. If you were looking at the temple as the sun rose, you have to turn your eyes away, because the Temple would look as though it was on fire!

It is small wonder the disciples, who were more or less, country bumpkins, exclaimed in wonder, “Rabbi such beauty, such amazing stones!” To which Jesus replied, “this will all pass away! I tell you the time is coming when not one stone will be left standing on another!”

It makes us wonder, all these many years later, what Jesus saw, when he looked at that impressive place of worship? The Temple was being built during his whole lifetime. His father Joseph, being a carpenter, may well have been conscripted, along with thousands of his countrymen, to work on this massive project. He would also have known of the cruel burden of taxation levied on the backs of people already struggling to survive.

When powerful people erect massive buildings to show off their power and glory, it is almost always the poor and vulnerable that pay the price for it! And you do not quarry, transport, carve and install massive marble and granite stones without casualties! Those beautiful stones were stained by the blood of the people of Israel! Is this something we need to think about?

Jesus would also have understood that the temple was designed to control the way society operated, to create and defend privilege. If

you look at the picture of the temple on the cover of our bulletin, you can see how it was defined by walls, the walls that dictated who had access to the God of Israel; walls between Jews and Gentiles, walls separating men and women, walls to define the special access reserved for the clergy, and at the very center of the temple there was the Holy of Holies, which only the High Priest could enter and that only once during the year, on the Day of Atonement. The closer you come to God the fewer were include.

Ironically, when the High Priest entered that sacred space, the room was totally empty, the Ark of the Covenant had disappeared hundreds of years earlier. I picture the High Priest standing wondering what to do with himself! Maybe after a while, he asked in a quiet voice, “Jahveh are you in here. Do you have anything to say to me?”

Hopefully, he might realize that empty space was a reminder that God is fundamentally a mystery no one we can wrap or minds around or use for their own purposes!

According to John, what caught Jesus attention, was the fact that the temple had become a vast marketplace! It was a large shopping mall where greedy merchants were taking advantage of vulnerable people to line their own pockets. They did this because they could, and they could because they and their friends had written the rules, which were specifically designed to make that possible! Their greedy behavior directly contradicted the very purpose for which the Temple had supposedly been created.

Jesus said, “It is written my house shall be a house of prayer for all people, but you have turned it into a market place! (Mark says, “A den of thieves!”) But the greatest obscenity was the fact that the commodity being bought and sold was God, or more accurately, access to the love and favor of God. They had become deaf to the

voices of the great prophets of Israel who thundered out a message condemning those who thought God could be bought and sold!

**I grew up being mesmerized by that wonderful voice of Martin Luther King giving new life and relevance to those ancient words”
“Take away from me the noise of your songs, (sorry Jen) to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But, let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!”**

You have probably noticed, when a white preacher like me speaks those same words, it doesn’t sound nearly as convincing as they did when Martin spoke them! We never fully escape from our place of white privilege, and we’ve never really figured out what to do about it! I think we have this deep suspicion that, addressing that problem would involve our giving up a lot of the comfort and security we have come to depend on.

Last Sunday, Sonja and I watched the movie “Selma.” It was a real “Jesus moment,” when the line of policemen stood down and Martin realizing what had happened, quietly knelt down on that bridge and all his brothers and sisters knelt there with him. I imagine them giving thanks for what God had accomplished through their pain and struggle.” I wish I could have been there! But would I have had the faith and courage to go back to that bridge after I had been beaten and reviled? I don’t know the answer to that question.

This is the point in the Gospel lesson when Jesus got serious about the temple way of life, and becomes, as someone has said, “God’s Son out of control!” Personally, I believe Jesus knew exactly what he was doing and he knew what the consequences would be. Mark tells us, “From that moment on, the chief priests and elders of the temple colluded to see how they might arrange to have Jesus arrested and put to death.” As Brother Martin discovered, you do not challenge that coalition of temple, and empire without paying a price!

But we are here today because those worldly powers did not succeed in defeating Jesus revolutionary message, his alternative vision of society; his justice seeking, compassion embracing, boundary crossing, hope generating, way of life. By the time John wrote his version of the Jesus story, that magnificent temple was all gone, reduced to smoke and ruins by the armies of Emperor Titus in 70A.D. But the temple had been rendered largely irrelevant long before it's physical destruction. It was that prophetic vision of Jesus that replaced the temple as the center of the practice of the presence of God. The temple had been replaced by small communities of believers, gathered together in homes and synagogues to pray, to study the scriptures and to share in works of mercy and, of course, to eat and drink together. Who needs a temple when, as Jesus said, "Where two and three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst?"

And all those walls, had now become an embarrassment! Paul put it plainly, "in Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, rich or poor, you are all one body in Christ!" Clearly, Jesus was a "boundary crosser," and not a "wall builder!"

But now, let us consider an even more implausible idea. If Jesus is the "new temple," that is, the one who opens the way to God's heart and house, the "house of many rooms," where hospitality is extended to all, and we are joined to him in our baptism, this suggests that you and I have been given the invitation to be, "living stones", in that "new temple!"

If that's true, it puts the meaning and purpose of our life in a new light! That idea is exciting but also a little scary, because it raises the question of what needs to be cleaned up in our lives. This morning, as I was waking up, a rather bizarre picture dropped into my mind. I saw a rather dilapidated out house with my name on the door. And I heard myself complaining that I knew I was supposed to be a

temple but I felt more like an outhouse! than a gleaming temple of the Lord! Then I hear Jesus saying, “why are you trash talking about the good I’m trying to do in your life!”

This reminded me of Nelson Mandela’s famous words, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate but that we powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God! Your’ playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do! We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us!

I realize this is not a truth I can handle on my own! I need Jesus to be present in my temple and I need my brothers and sisters in the faith, with whom I can experience the loving and forgiving presence of Jesus. Thankfully, I don’t have to be a Robinson Caruso Christian! We have each other!

I’ve brought with me this morning, a picture that hangs in the sacristy, which I think has been there since the time of Andrew Rogness. It appears to be a picture of our common image of Jesus, but when we look at it carefully we see that it is made up o images of several dozen people, including Martin Luther King and Gandhi. The message is clear! We see Jesus in the faces of those who share his love and wisdom with us! (I passed the picture through the congregation)

Finally, thinking about that lonely High Priest in the Holy of Holies, of course, reminds me of a story! When Walter Wangerin became the regular preacher on the Lutheran Hour, he used his first broadcast to tell a story from his early childhood. I think he was maybe about five or six when this happened. This is how he described it.

“When I went to church, people were always talking and singing about “Seeing Jesus,” and everyone looked so comfortable, I thought I was the only one who had never seen Jesus. It bothered me that, for some reason, Jesus had not chosen to show himself to me. I begin a serious quest to find Jesus in what I believed to be his house. I saw our church as a very holy place!

I noticed when the pastor was up at the altar, I heard a voice that sounded quite different from the voice he normally spoke with when he asked me how I was doing. I thought Jesus might be up there in that compartment behind the altar! As soon as the service was over, I hurried up there and peaked behind the altar. All I found was a broken chair and some dusty old hymnals.

I was disappointed, but not ready yet to give up my search. I looked in other places, like the closet, where the pastor kept his holy robes. I checked upstairs in the balcony from which sometimes heavenly music came drifting down. But, Jesus wasn’t in any of those places as far as I could tell.

Then one Sunday, sitting next to my mother, I realized there was one room I had never explored! It was the room with “the Forbidden Door,” “The woman’s rest room!” During the sermon, I risked my mother’s wrath by slipping out of the pew. I went down into the basement where that rest room was located. I cautiously opened the door and called out in my small boy’s voice, “Jesus, are you in there?” All I heard was the echo of my own voice!

I sneaked back upstairs and sat next to my mother. Then I saw my mother get up and walk with lots of other people up to the communion rail. My strong, fearless mother, who once scared a bear out of our campground by yelling at it and banging on a kettle! My mother knelt like a little child and received that little white wafer on her tongue and took a sip of something dark in a little glass, but when she came back to the pew, she had this wonderful look of

peace and joy on her face. When she sat down next to me this wonderful, strange aroma came drifting down, I looked up at her and made a little gesture that said, “What’s that?” She smiled at me and said, “That’s Jesus, Jesus inside of me.”

I thought, “Of course! Where else would Jesus be but in my mother, the strongest, wisest and most loving person in the whole world. All these many years later, I still remember with gratitude how safe, and how blessed I was, just sitting there beside her, my mother who Jesus inside her!”

Frederick Buechner wrote “We have it in us to be Christs to each other and maybe in some way to bring joy to the heart of God. We have it in us to bless with him and forgive with him and to heal with him and once in a while to grieve with him as he grieves and to rejoice with him almost as though another’s joy were our own!

It is our business as brothers and sisters of Christ to speak with our hearts and to bear witness to, and live out of, and live toward, and live by, the true word of his holy story as that holy story seeks to stammer itself forth through the holy stories we all tell!

So, all these generations later, we gather together, we sing hymns, we listen to the scriptures, we call someone from our midst to study and listen to what that word might mean in our own lives and how it might inspire and shape our mission. We do that because we believe that Jesus is still present in our midst and we are his holy temples!