

07 March 2021, The 3rd Sunday of Lent: John 2:13-22

In 1986 I was serving as rector of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in northwest Chicago. On a Spring Tuesday morning I entered the Church to prepare for an early celebration of the Holy Eucharist. I found that the Church had been burgled. The thieves entered by breaking a small stained-glass window in the Narthex. They took every piece of silver, even the silver ciborium which holds the reserved Sacrament. The Hosts had simply been dumped out, some landing on the floor. I can hardly describe my emotions: shock, disbelief, anger. The thieves were never caught—so far as I know; the silver never recovered. The police officers said that usually a gang of thieves burgle numbers of churches in an area for silver. They often use a cargo van equipped with a kiln in the back, the silver being immediately put in and melted into lumps, making the stolen articles impossible to identify.

Whenever the story of Jesus driving the money and animal dealers out of the temple comes around, I think of that morning 35 years ago. On the face of it, there might not seem a connection, but there is for me. Let us briefly look at the story.

The exchanging of money and the selling of sacrificial animals were a service to worshipers. Roman money, the common currency, always had the Emperor's likeness or god's image. Such were unacceptable as offerings for the temple; the Torah states graven images are forbidden. It was not unlike exchanging American money for Canadian, with the money changers charging a small fee. In the ancient world, transporting livestock was not convenient. Instead, worshipers could purchase animals for sacrifice 'on the spot,' again for a 'cut' going to the dealers. Both such services were helpful, especially for those living away.

An obvious question is, "If the money exchange and animal market were so helpful for people, why was Jesus so angry?" Some might place an 'anti-capitalist' spin on the story: Jesus objected because it was "big business," the merchants were price gouging, ripping off worshipers by making unfair profits. This interpretation has some merit—Jesus does refer to them as 'thieves,' but clearly the emphasis is not so much on the activity of the temple entrepreneurs but on the nature and purpose of the temple.

In the Old Testament the temple was understood as God's dwelling place on earth; among other images the temple is described as God's 'footstool,' 'the gate of heaven'; the earthly focal point of God's all-encompassing presence. Jesus saw all the fussing and fuming over animals and coins. It had become big business at the expense of the more important "small" business of mercy, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, praise, and worship. The stuff of worship had become more crucial than right worship. It had become all upside down, backwards, inside out, all wrong. Jesus had enough of it and acted; perhaps just trying to shock them, wake them up from their dream world and back to reality of true worship.

The Disciples, needing to understand Jesus' confrontational behavior, remembered Psalm 69:9: *Zeal for your house will consume me*. Zeal is single-minded desire; *defining* desire; a desire from which all other desires spring. Like anything else zeal can be misused: zeal twisted in one's moral life is lust and greed; zeal twisted in your spiritual life is narcissism; zeal twisted in worship is obsessive fixation on form rather than content.

Zeal for God's house.... We love our beautiful Church, we value all things around us in this place, but the truth is they have no intrinsic value in and of themselves. What makes them valuable is what they hold and whom they reveal. A silver chalice? Any cup would do, a ten-dollar mug or a \$10,000 sterling chalice. We use precious metals for our vessels because of the One whom the vessels serve. The silver does not make the contents more precious, the Blood of our Lord Jesus, poured out for us, consecrates the cup. So, it is too with the bricks and mortar, the plaster and wood, the vestments and stained glass, and all the rest.

That morning in 1986, as the small group of worshipers came into the Church, they could see something was wrong. As I told them of the burglary some wept. Then, we got on with it: using an inexpensive wine glass and a dessert plate, we *celebrated* the Holy Eucharist with sadness, in intercession for the thieves, and with joy. They took the silver, but the true treasure can never be taken by any power mortal or spiritual.

True worship is zeal, our consuming, defining desire for God. Our true treasure is Jesus Christ, always pouring himself out for his people, for the sins of the world.

Merciful God stir up in us your Holy Spirit, that following the example of Jesus our Lord we, like him, are consumed with zeal for your house.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.