

March 7, 2021

Third Sunday in Lent

*"Cleaning House"*

Psalm 19 ~ 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 ~ John 2:13-22

A while back someone sent me a news link from BBC America. It was entitled "Talking Fish Stuns New York." You can google it yourself. Here's what it said:

*A fish heading for slaughter in a New York market shouted warnings about the end of the world, two fish cutters have claimed. Zalmen Rosen, a Hasidic Jew, says co-worker Luis Niveló, a Christian, was about to kill a carp to be made into gefilte fish in the city's New Square Fish Market when it began shouting in Hebrew, saying that "everyone needs to account for themselves because the end is nigh." Mr. Niveló told the paper he was so shocked that he fell into a stack of slimy packing crates, before running in panic to the shop entrance and grabbing Mr. Rosen, shouting: "The fish is talking!" However his co-worker reacted with disbelief: "You crazy meshugeneh!" A disbelieving Mr. Rosen then rushed to the back of the store, only to hear the fish identifying itself as the soul of a local Hasidic man who had died the previous year.*

*The incident relates to the beliefs of some Hasidic Jews, who say that righteous people can be reincarnated as fish. Many members of the city's Jewish community are now certain that God, troubled by the war in the Middle East, has revealed Himself in fish form. "Two men do not dream the same dream," said Abraham Spitz, who visited Mr. Rosen's shop to observe the site of the miracle. "It is very rare that God reminds people he exists in this modern world. But when he does, you cannot ignore it." (The fish) instructed him to pray and study the Torah, but Mr. Rosen admitted that in a state of panic he attempted to kill the fish, injuring himself in the process and ending up in the hospital.*

Now that's an amazing story, and I really don't know what to make of it. But no matter what I think about it ... the part of the story that really got me was the last line that read: *"The fish was eventually killed by Mr. Niveló and sold."* Isn't that amazing! They killed it and sold it! It may have been God speaking! It may have been a voice from the dead. It may have been a demon or the devil himself. But what do we humans do when confronted by the awe-filled, mysterious presence of the holy? We kill it and sell it!

Our gospel story today tells us about the day that Jesus got angry because the holy place was being disrespected ... because the spiritual was being commercialized ... because the Temple was being desecrated by those who kill the holy and sell it.

It may bother us that Jesus got mad. We often think of Jesus as being a kind of dispassionate stoic ... the pure self-controlled mind of God always on top of things. But our gospel stories tell of Jesus' heart. Like us, he has deep feelings. He gets sad to the point of weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus. He feels compassion for the poor and outcast ... for the people who feel like lost sheep without a shepherd. He grieves for the beloved city of Jerusalem, for its steadfast rejection of every prophet sent from God. And he gets mad.

Jesus doesn't get angry all that often. But he gets angry when Peter tries to talk him out of the hard way of the cross and into the path of easy triumph. He gets angry at the religious leaders who play gatekeepers to God and exclude people from the tender mercies of God's grace. And he gets angry with the moneychangers and marketeers in the Temple. As "wrath of God stories" go in the Bible, these are pretty tame. He doesn't call down fire from heaven like God did at Sodom and Gomorrah for their sin of inhospitality to the divine messengers. He doesn't drown them in a flood like God does in the story of Noah or blow them to smithereens like God does in the story of Jericho. But you can't live in this world and love people and want what's best for them and not get angry sometimes at how we fail to live up to God's hopes for us. We get mad at our children sometimes precisely because we love them. So, Jesus gets angry.

It's not completely clear what raises Jesus' ire in this story about the cleansing of the Temple and its parallels in the other gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus quotes Jeremiah: "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.*" *But you have made it a den of robbers*" (Mark 11:17). In John he says, "*Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!*" (John 2:16). In those days, Jews would come from all over the world to worship God. For many, it was a once in a lifetime pilgrimage. They had to go through seven days of purification rites before they could enter the temple proper. The Temple complex was huge, about 35 acres! In the largest area, the court of the Gentiles where even non-Jews could approach God, were a variety of vendors necessary to its operation. The Jews who had come from afar could hardly carry the animals they would need to make sacrifice, a bull or a lamb for the well to do, a pigeon for the poor. So, animal stalls were set up where they could purchase what they needed. They brought coins from all over the world, but these coins had graven images. They had to be exchanged for local Jewish coins which lacked such engravings.

Did Jesus object to the profits these vendors made? Are we to assume they were taking advantage of the poor? Or was it the location that offended him ... the noise and bustle in the one place the Gentiles were allowed to come and pray? Is his anger about greed or about

exclusion or about irreverence? Or is it something else altogether? Whatever it was, Jesus made a whip and then he made a scene.

This drew an immediate reaction from the keepers of the Temple. They demanded to know by what sign he had authority to do this. Jesus said, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up!*" It made no sense to them, of course, because they were listening at a different level than Jesus was speaking. But the Jews were extremely sensitive about their Temple. "Destroy this Temple!" was all they needed to hear Jesus say. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this is the moment when the Jewish leaders decided that Jesus had to die to protect the people from the Roman wrath. The Gospel of John places this event near the beginning of Jesus' ministry to make it thematic, as if to say, "This is what Jesus was all about."

Now, some hear this story in our time as Jesus against the Jews. But Jesus was a Jew ... worshipping in the Temple of his own people. That means, when Jesus cleaned house, he started at home. And so should we. Would Jesus ever be angry with us? Do parents ever get angry with their children? Do partners ever get angry with each other? Of course ... and why? Because love expects the best from us.

Jesus expects the best from us. First of all, he demands due reverence for God's house. It should be a place of prayer for all people ... not desecrated by human greed or by those who want to control access and exclude people from meeting God. I think that means for us ... the keepers of this temple ... that God has given us a place we are charged to keep holy. That means giving our resources ... our time, our treasure, our trouble ... to take care of it as our witness to the world of what we think of our God. That means keeping it in good order and appearance. That means supporting the cost of keeping the lights on and the heat running. That means leaving the church better than you found it when it is used for purposes aside from worship.

I think this story also says something about how we behave when we come here. It means that we never gather or let others gather here without understanding that this is God's space and it should be treated with reverence. It says that this is a place to set aside other personal agendas ... to dedicate ourselves to making this space a sanctuary for all people. It means treating all people with the dignity and respect we would give to Christ himself ... and even in our speech ... to make this place emotionally safe for everyone.

I loved worshiping in our sanctuary, and I know you did, too. But this past year has shown us that any place we gather to worship God is sacred. I love the fact that we have shared so many beautiful, sacred moments with God and with each other here. Our church is holy ground. But there is also a danger that we hold the place in higher reverence than the God to whom it belongs ... that we trap God here so we can visit God when we feel like it ... forgetting that

God is also with us in the world and that there is no place where God is not present. This place is holy to God. But so is your home. So is your workplace. So is every person you encounter. That's the biggest danger of all ... that church buildings could become more important than the people God loves ... that they might be turned into a museum of the holy ... instead of a busy spiritual hospital for the wounded. Buildings are made for God's people, not God's people for buildings.

Jesus was accused of irreverence, but he was calling for the right kind of reverence ... where we treat holy spaces with respect ... but people with a higher respect ... and God with the greatest respect of all. Jesus attacked the false reverence we give to our idols ... our power, our control, our greatness, which leads us to arrogance and violence. As Tony Campolo suggests, Jesus made hamburger of their sacred cows! And that is a dangerous thing to do.

It shouldn't take a talking fish to make us stop and stand in awe. Life itself is a miracle, a grace gift from God. Our lives and the lives of every person on the planet are precious to God and they are God's gift to us. Instead of killing the holy and selling it, let us learn to stand in awe and treat all people as the temples of the holy that they are.

May we pray?

O God, teach us to have reverence for you ... reverence for human life ... reverence for each other ... and reverence for this place which is called by your name. Forgive us for the way we kill the holy and disrespect what is precious ... who is precious ... to you. Have mercy on us, O God, and bring us to peace in your holy of holies, the human heart. Amen.