

3rd Sunday of Lent “Cleansing the Temple”

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Here is a good “money joke” I found...

An old one dollar bill and a well-worn twenty-dollar bill arrived at a Federal Reserve Bank to be retired. As they moved along the conveyor belt, they struck up a conversation. The twenty-dollar bill was awash in nostalgia about its travels all over the country.

“I’ve had a great life,” the twenty proclaimed. “Why I’ve been to Las Vegas and Atlantic City, the finest restaurants in New York, performances on Broadway, and even a cruise to the Caribbean ...”

“Wow!” said the one-dollar bill. “You’ve really had an exciting life!”

“So, tell me,” says the twenty, “where have you been throughout your lifetime?”

The one dollar bill replies, “Oh, I’ve been to the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, the Lutheran Church.”

The twenty-dollar bill interrupts of course and asks, “What’s a church?”

What are we to make of the Gospel reading today? In part, it deals with the very sensitive issue about the relationship between money and Church. Was Jesus opposed to the idea of giving money for holy purposes? No, this is not it. After all, Jesus tells the rich man to sell everything, give to the poor, and to follow him. And in the story of the widow’s mite, Jesus tells his disciples how holy the old woman was for giving the little she had to the collection. So why is Jesus now turning over tables and driving the merchants who sold the sacrificial animals away? What Jesus is frustrated with in the Gospel reading is how the temple was changed from a “prophetic” place into a “profitable” place.

You see, in Jesus’ time, the temple priests lived lives of luxury by the collection money and by the take they received from the merchants. In many places in the Gospel, Jesus voices his frustration with the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. This story is one more example. How do we avoid this kind of thing in today’s Church? For one thing, today’s priests live on a compensation plan set by the archdiocese. Parish staff typically make less than what they could be making in the private sector as well. And the truth is, we don’t mind. We are here for the ministry, not for profit. Also, our 501c3 non-profit status makes it such that there can be no fundraising on our property for personal gain. This was a problem at the Temple in Jesus’ time.

Although we can spend some time on the subject of money and Church, there is a far more interesting question that is raised in the Gospel reading, in my opinion, namely, how efficacious was the temple sacrifice in the mind of Jesus? I mentioned this topic a little bit last week. You see, the slaughter of animals for the redemption of sins was an ancient practice. The ancient pagan religions did this all the time. The pagan idea was, if we feed the gods with a goat, or sometimes even a person, then maybe the gods will give us a favor or two, possibly protect us from our neighbors’ gods from getting grumpy with

us. In the Hebrew world, however, sacrificing animals wasn't about feeding or mollifying a fickle pantheon. By sacrificing to God the first fruits of their crops and livestock, the Hebrews solemnly recognized that God owns everything on this earth, including their very lives and family.

When the Hebrews of old felt the need for forgiveness of sins, an animal sacrifice seemed like a good penance. It is from Leviticus where we get the term scapegoat. After a while, however, Jewish prophets and theologians began to make the connection that the sacrifice that God desires isn't the blood of animals, but the sacrifice of a humble and contrite heart, like in David's Psalm 51. Jesus doesn't see this kind of spiritual conversion happening at the temple, in the House of God, and so he drives them out with a whip.

And a remarkable reversal in the theology of sacrifice is foreshadowed in this story, especially as we make our pilgrimage through Lent into Holy Week! Jesus says to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Remember that a definition of a temple is a place where God is present and worshiped. The irony in this story is, when Jesus is talking to the temple priests, God is fully present in the person standing in front of them. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." He is referring to his pending death and resurrection. His death, remember, is for the atonement of our sins, and here is the reversal.

It is no longer we who sacrifice animals to God for the atonement of our sins. It is rather God who now sacrifices Himself for us and the sake of our salvation. Indeed, Jesus gives us his very body and blood in the Eucharist to nourish us, sustain us, and save us. All that is asked from our part is to offer ourselves to him in return, to offer a conversion of heart, and to demonstrate this conversion in the way we love God and neighbor. This is far more pleasing to God than burnt offerings. When we receive the Eucharist worthily, our prayers rise to heaven like incense! And so, we can ask ourselves, do I honor the Sabbath like I should? Am I dedicating enough time to prayer each day? Am I supporting the Church and other charities like I should? When I receive Jesus in the Eucharist, do I work on becoming more like Jesus to people around me at home, at work, at school or in the community or am I letting earthly desires to take precedence over heavenly desires? My friends, Lent is an opportunity to grow spiritually, to grow closer to Jesus in every facet of our life. We are therefore invited to take a moment and reflect on what needs to be purified in the temple of our souls so to prepare our hearts for Easter joy.