

Year B, Third Sunday of Lent
March 7, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

Good morning everyone. Today is the Third Sunday in Lent, 2021. As of today we have observed a complete liturgical year away from our church home on Hinckley Ridge. The Third Sunday in Lent 2020 was our last in person service. We have come a long way. And through our perseverance, through the sacrifices of so many, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. There will be enough vaccines for every adult in the country available by May. Teachers and people over 60 can get them now in Maine. I keep hearing folks talk about how well things are being run at the vaccination sites. Sure there are issues, we won’t crack the innumerable sources of inequity in our society in our vaccine roll out, but for the scale of the undertaking, it sure seems like our government is governing.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Our bishop sent an email on Thursday asking us to pencil in a Mass at the Cathedral on May 18th. **AT** the cathedral. There was a bold type asterisk in the message, safety allowing, but that is something, isn’t it? And the Bishop has relaxed his request that parishes remain closed, leaving it fully up to us to determine if, when and how we reopen. We have a committee here at St. Francis starting to think and pray on all of this. We’re going to be going back to church. Together. And by that I mean all of us. Zoomers/YouTubers, don’t worry, we’re going to keep on streaming these services. Since we have terrible internet access inside our building for now, we will have to continue to be creative and flexible, but including everyone in this return is a top priority of the leadership of the parish. No one will be left behind.

We’ll be able to figure out all of the logistics and safety measures we will need to have in place, though this will all take time and patience. Please rest assured that the committee will err, if we err, on the side of conservatism when it comes to reopening. We’ll figure this out together.

Where I am confident that we will figure out how to do this safely, I wonder, though, what it will feel like? For the past year, our building has been closed; our church has very much been open. Have you ever gotten weekly phone calls from “the Church”? Had lobsters and gift bags hand delivered? Given this much to our giving campaign? Given and done this much towards our Outreach efforts? “Been” to church so many weeks in a row? Zoom worship works. Not for all of us, but for a lot of us it does. The vast majority of folks get gold stars for church attendance this year. Our numbers this winter have been higher than they have been in person in past years. That

is great and it is going to be weird to be back in church together. Things might return to vaguely familiar patterns faster than we might have imagined just a few months ago, but what is it going to feel like being in a room with others? being in a sacred space, at all? What is it going to feel having Eucharist in some new format? (No more common cup, for sure). I've been thinking a lot about church, about our church and about how we gather as St. Francis by the Sea, and soon, at St. Francis by the Sea. A lot about what it means to be a church, to be at a church.

Our gospel today, John's telling of Jesus driving the money changers from the Temple, is about how a people gather before God. Jesus thought a lot about that, about what it meant to come together, to worship together, to gather before God as God's people. And he had some pretty strong feelings about it would seem, strong enough to break out the whip of cords and make a scene!

A little background. Our pericope from St. John's Gospel is set in one of Judaism's pilgrim seasons, a time where folks were called to make pilgrimage to the Temple to offer sacrifice. Sites of mass pilgrimage require a lot of infrastructure. Have you been to Lourdes? Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal or Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain? I have read about the vast pilgrim city that manifests in Mecca each year for the Haj. When a lot of people from distant parts gather, it takes a lot of stuff.

The two *things* in particular that pilgrims to the Temple in Jerusalem needed were objects of sacrifice and money to pay their Temple tax. If you were trekking across the wilds from Damascus, or even Galilee to Jerusalem to offer your flawless calf to God, do you think that calf would still be flawless by the time you got there? Would the dove in your pack even survive the journey? No. People had to buy what they needed when they got there, hence the dealers in cattle, sheep and doves.

I bought a little bird at a temple once in Thailand. It is common in South East Asia, to buy offerings to the Buddha. But the offering purchased was not to be sacrificed, the little bird wasn't killed, it was set free on your behalf. Isn't that lovely? (The birds sure thought so). I did learn, though, that the while the birds are set free, they were conditioned like homing pigeons to return to their home roost. So the same birds were ransomed, released and re-caged daily. But as in most things spiritual, it is the intention that really matters, it is, truly, the thought that counts!

The money changers were another interesting aspect of temple life. Judaism had strict prohibitions against graven images. Money, even then, were cast with images. Remember Jesus

asking about whose picture was on a coin? The Emperor's, right? Hence render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.

That was a bit more of a gott-cha than it might seem. The Pharisee had that coin on him while in the Temple. That was prohibited in the Temple because it had an image on it (You hypocrites)! Folks coming from far and wide on pilgrimage brought money with them from all over, most of it unsuitable for use to pay their annual tithe/tax which was paid ritualistically by placing it in large coffers within the temple walls. (remember the widow placing her mite; those coffers). The money changer's business was to take the ritually unsuitable money and change it into coinage that could be brought into the temple.

So why did Jesus freak out and drive out the money changers and the sacrificial critter dealers and the sacrifices themselves? One idea is, related to our reading from Exodus and our Psalm this morning, is that Jesus was protesting the seemingly inevitable human trend "to corrupt the law and derive from it a profit." That is human nature. We tend to seek and find any loop hole we can and turn anything, even the practice of religious sacrifice, to our advantage. I was on a church supply website the other day and a clergy shirt was advertised and the "Same one sold at the Vatican gift shop!" I don't know if that is a perversion of any law, but it stuck out as I was procrastinating in my sermon writing on the topic. But the sinfulness of human nature was certainly one factor in Jesus' outrage, and certainly the dealers and money changers, like tax collectors, were an easy target.

But there is a bigger issue, one apropos to our return to our church building. Did God even want a Temple in the first place? That is sort of a trick question. Originally, how was God's presence recognized by Israel (like in the wanderings of in the desert and the occupation of Canaan)? The Ark of the Covenant, right? The vessel in which the tablets of the Law, the Decalogue, were kept. And they marched it before their army, and where it was, in the midst of God's people, God was. And when it wasn't being carried from place to place as the nation wandered, it was in a tent, the Tabernacle. It was a very elaborate tent, but a tent nonetheless. And that is what God wanted.

Fast forward 400 years. It is the reign of King David. Remember his memorable line, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD is under tent curtains." Fair enough, it is natural to want to build a suitable, if not grand, place to encounter God, but how did God respond? "You shall not build Me a house to dwell in. For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought up Israel, even to this day, but have gone from tent to tent, and

from *one* tabernacle *to another*. Wherever I have moved about with all Israel, have I ever spoken a word to any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people, saying, ‘Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?’...” No. God didn’t want a permanent home. God, through Nathan, continued “And I have been with you wherever you have gone...” (This is all found in 1st Chronicles 17).

It is funny: God didn’t want Israel to have a king, but they kept asking and God relented. The same thing happens here. They kept asking for a physical seat of God’s power and, for whatever reason, God relented and the temple of Solomon was built.

So fast forward 1000 years, and there is Jesus within the walls of the Temple. Not the one that Solomon built, Nebuchadnezzar razed that one, but the second temple, built by Herod the Great. It was newly completed in Jesus’ day. But also remember, this story, the destruction of the temple and rebuilding in three days, while yes, it was about Jesus, not the temple, it was written after the destruction of the 2nd Temple by the Romans in year 70 of the Common Era. The Desolating Sacrilege had happened. There was no Temple. Judaism was in the midst of the painful move from being a temple based people to a rabbinic faith, one defined by the Torah and its interpreters and in the hearts of the people themselves.

Back to Jesus and His whip of cords... Another reason that Jesus may have driven the commercial interests out of the Temple may have been strategic thinking. The function of the temple, as a pilgrimage site, as an institution, was dependant on people’s ability to first, make sacrifices, and second, to pay their obligation. Shutting down the commerce shut the temple’s ability to host worship and collect money... you know, be like a church! God didn’t want a Temple originally. Jesus was being persecuted by the leaders of the temple hierarchy, corrupt leaders at the head of a corrupt institution. This move was a blow to the capacity of the institution to function. And why? Because Jesus didn’t need the Temple. His body was the Temple. And believing in Him, becoming His disciple, taking up your cross and following Him, where ever it leads, especially to the Cross... that was where God was found, not in a room in a building, even a building as holy as the Temple.

Now we are not a particularly corrupt institution, St. Francis, the Diocese of Maine, the Episcopal Church, Mainline American Protestantism, or the Anglican Communion, and in the pandemic we certainly haven’t faced anything like the desolating sacrilege of Titus’ army. But the situation of the world has and will continue to inform/steer/make demands of us. Things at

church, when we regather, won't look exactly the same. More importantly, they won't feel the same, certainly not for longer than we hope.

What matters, what mattered way back when Jesus drove those folks out of the Temple, what has mattered since we went remote for worship one year ago, what will matter when we get back to our lovely little spot on Hinckley Ridge, or perhaps the Blue Hill town park, at least for a while we figure out internet stuff, is that wherever two or three are gathered, more importantly, how we are gathered, doesn't matter. That we are gathered in His name, Jesus', now, that is what matters. And that we can do. That we will do, sooner, God willing, than later.

You all have amazed me over the past year. That you could hunker down for a pandemic, cease gathering in the way people have gathered together before God forever, that is gathered together, that you could keep church going, thriving, even, having our best giving campaign ever, praying well together, serving the community, growing in Christ, and all of this with a brand new priest... simply amazing. We have bright days ahead and I am glad to be here with you. God is with us, to the end of the age. AMEN