

Lent 3 B
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22
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When I was a kid in church, the story of Jesus chasing the moneychangers from the temple was said to mean that it was sacrilegious to hold a bake sale on Sunday in the church building. Things have changed. Today we are comfortable selling all sorts of things in the church building, even on Sunday, though they do have to be for some missional cause. We've dropped a lot of the restrictions even I remember on Sundays here in Texas—blue tape doesn't rope off certain shelves in the grocery stores, you can shop just about anyplace you want, and people can wear just about anything to church, at least to this church. Depending on your generation, you may see this as a good thing or a bad thing. But I will venture to say that even in our more secular society, even those with a looser interpretation of what's OK on Sunday and in the church building still know there's a line between sacred and secular. Where the line falls will be a matter of debate, and it wouldn't be just a generational debate. But in our tradition, we still recognize some sort of line between holy and not so holy.

Jesus, here in the second chapter of John's gospel, is drawing such a line. The people he chased out of the temple represented the financial system that had grown up around the practice of sacrifices to God. People came to Jerusalem from all over, even from other countries, to make their obligatory sacrifices, and to do so, they had to buy animals, unless they'd brought their own. They also had to make an offering, but it wasn't allowable in Roman coinage—that's one of those lines between sacred and

secular—so the people had to get their money changed to the temple currency. And you know those middle people weren't just there as a public service; surely they turned a profit, whether to a greater or lesser degree. As Jesus goes ballistic and turns them all out, it's really not clear whether he objected to the whole practice as it had developed, or whether he saw exploitation and profit-making by the sellers and money-changers. He doesn't really say when the temple leaders ask him.

What he does say in effect, though, is that there's a new sheriff in town. This is a story that is in all four gospels, and much of the wording is the same in all of them. But the other three gospels place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry, right before the Passover and his crucifixion. For them it's the act that pushed the religious leaders over the edge and caused them to seek his death. But in John, this event happens at the very beginning, the second chapter. In this gospel, the message is that people seeking the presence of God need not look to the temple system, with all its layers and requirements, but that they should look to Jesus, the new temple, the site of God's dwelling in the world.

A word of caution here about what we in the church often do, which is to see the Jewish system of sacrifice as outdated and superseded by the Christian one. This perspective has led to much anti-Semitism through the centuries, and many have especially used the gospel of John for this purpose. But God gave the sacrificial system to the people; it was the people who misused it, the people who missed the point and turned it into something that didn't always glorify God. And that's not because they were Jews. It's because they were human beings, exactly the way we human being

Christians often do not live in the church in ways that glorify God. Jesus turning over tables in the temple was not just doing away with an inferior Jewish custom. He's trying to get our attention, to redraw the line for us as we attempt to live as people of God.

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the church at Corinth, asserts that we can see the kind of line Christ has drawn for the world when we look at his death on the cross. Paul contrasts what regular, normal people see when they look at Jesus hanging in death and disgrace, and what the people of Christ have come to understand about what happened there. Paul contrasts the wisdom and power of the world with the wisdom and power of God and makes it clear that they are two very different things. For the smart, powerful people of the world look at the dead, crucified Jesus and see anything but wisdom and power. And that wasn't just true then; it's true now too. We have a special Jesus filter that we put this story through, to make it make sense to us, since we too are very wise and pretty powerful. We know that it all comes out in the end, that Jesus wins in the end. But if we didn't do that filtering, if we were honest when we look at the cross, the fact is that we see a sucker, a loser, one who gave in instead of fighting for what was right. It's offensive to even hear me say it. But when you lay aside the "three days later" part and the empty tomb, you have to admit, the cross holds little attraction for us. We see in it foolishness at best, and at worst, offensiveness.

The cross of Christ is foolish and offensive, because it represents the most broken, most sinful, most selfish, most powerless parts of us. The cross is foolishness

because the world and culture teach us that we must avoid and run from the things the cross stands for. Our lives are built on the belief that we must be good and live up to certain standards of decency, and if we can't do that, we at least need to look like we're doing it. Mike Yaconelli, in his book, *Messy Spirituality*, says that "Unfortunately, in many religious circles, there exists an unwritten rule. Pretend. Act like God is in control when you don't believe [it]. Give the impression everything is okay in your life when it's not. Pretend you believe when you doubt; hide your imperfections; maintain the image of a perfect marriage with healthy and well-adjusted children when your family is like any other normal dysfunctional family. And whatever you do, don't admit that you sin" (*Messy Spirituality*, p. 37).

Yaconelli reminds us that pretending is quick and easy, and it's what we expect of each other socially. "How are you?" "Fine." I fall into that convention even when I don't mean to—I'll ask, "How are you?" when I'm visiting someone in the hospital or calling them after a death. I know they're not OK; that's the whole reason I'm calling! Yet we're so conditioned, and to get past it we then have to look the other person in the eye and say, "No, really, it has to be hard right now, so how are you holding up?" But we don't go there unless we really know each other, or unless one or both people are a little courageous.

You know, you walk up to someone you don't know real well and ask, "How are you?" and they reply, "Well, I have this infection, and I'm feeling like I'm addicted to internet gambling, and I got mad and spanked my kid in the middle of HEB the other day, and I'm just not sure I believe God is in all of this with me." And you kind of go,

“Oh.” And you start looking for the nearest exit. TMI—too much information. Didn’t want to get to know you that well; wasn’t really looking for that level of connection with you. So we pretend instead. And Yaconelli says that “Pretending perpetuates the illusion of relationships by connecting us on the basis of who we aren’t. [my emphasis]” (p. 38). And part of that is that if I’m going to connect with you on the basis of who you are, there’s a good chance it will call on me to share who I am, really. And who I really am is often just too painful for me to even contemplate, much less share with you.

The problem is, in learning to reject pain and mess and to pretend that all things are happily in their place, the apostle Paul tells us today that we have thus learned to reject Christ. We have taken the side of the Jews and the Greeks who were religiously offended by the thought of a Savior who would take his place on death row. When we reject sin and pain and mess, in ourselves and in other people, we say in effect to Christ, thank you, but I have no need of your cross; come back and see me once Easter rolls around. I like that cross with the lilies coming out of it, instead of the heavy, splintery, blood-stained one. We deny our need of what Christ offers us, which is love and grace and mercy in the midst of our raggedy mess, a space where we can tell the truth and still have a place at the table. When we reject the offense of the cross, we deny the power of God the chance to touch us where we need it most desperately. And we deny the ways God would use us to touch others in desperate need as well.

I’m not sure exactly what Jesus was so mad at that day in the temple. We surely give Jesus all sorts of reasons to get angry. But I do trust that he would, even

today, turn that righteous anger to the cause of freeing us from our foolishness and our offense, which keep us from loving and helping one another. I do believe he would turn his anger toward freeing the millions in the world oppressed by economic systems until only recently regarded as wise. Jesus has redrawn the lines, and they do not fall where we thought. But such is the wisdom and the power of God in Christ crucified.

1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1:19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

1:20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

1:21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

1:22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,

1:23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

1:24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1:25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.