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Lent 3
John 2:13-22

Jesus challenged a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God, a temptation that exists for contemporary Christianity as well as for the Judaism of Jesus' day...The great danger is that the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in the Gospel of John, will fall into the trap of equating the authority of its own institutions with the presence of God. All religious institutional embeddedness – whether in the form of temple worship, unjust social systems, or repressive religious practices – is challenged by the

revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

(Gail R. O'Day, Emory University)

For the moment, Temple authority was his.

Righteous indignation can be a very tricky thing. We are lucky to have televisions at home, where we can rant and rave at the idiocy of politicians on both sides of the aisle without doing much harm. Oh, maybe our spouse or kids need to leave the room because they've endured too much, but the rest of the world is blissfully ignorant about the threats we have made to Newt Gingrich, Joe Biden, Jon Stewart, or Rush Limbaugh. And while some of us are aware that our

faith has an ethical dimension, we sometimes wish our clergy would “stick to religion.”

When the Presiding Bishop tackles the government about the recession, we may grumble, “leave politics to the politicians.” And yet...if our faith is to inform our daily lives, there must be a co-mingling of church and state, of religion and politics.

Certainly the official separation of church and state is a good thing. It protects the government from being controlled by a denomination we don't much care for, and it protects *us* from being controlled by the government. Of course, we might think differently if the Episcopal Church were the

official state religion, but...it's not. And I say, “Hurray” for the founding fathers.

At first reading the Gospel for today may not seem to say much about politics. We are drawn into one of the outer courtyards of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was quite unlike a modern church: It was an enormous complex of buildings and courtyards. The whole purpose of the Temple was the offering of sacrifice to God. Offering was made for families and individuals, and for communities and the nation.

The offering at the Temple must have been incredibly noisy, and it was certainly bloody. The offerings were alive when they reached

the Temple. Jews who came from far away couldn't bring their own animals, so suitable animals were kept for sale in a compound in an outer court of the Temple. And to buy an offering, one had to use the correct money – Roman and Greek money had images on it, so it had to be exchanged for Temple money. All of this certainly led to a bit of profiteering.

Some of the less-than-honest merchants saw in this situation a marketing opportunity. They might have yelled out, “Only \$19.99 for these lovely lambs while stocks remain.” Or, “Attention, Temple shoppers – blue lantern specials on aisle three!” Sometimes an animal that was brought by a local would be judged

not worthy of sacrifice, and then a new animal had to be bought – another sales opportunity.

Seeing all this commerce in the outer courts of the Lord made Jesus *angry*! For the one and only time in the Gospel narratives, he seems to have lost his cool completely! He made a whip out of cords, drove the animals out of the courtyard, turned over tables, caused general chaos – it must have been quite a sight.

Did Jesus lose his temper because cheating was being done on holy ground? Or did he lose his temper because the poor were being

extorted in the name of religion? Take your pick. Probably both.

In first-century Palestine no concept existed suggesting that church and state were separate entities. Until occupation, Israel was what is called a “theocracy,” a government under the rule of God. To Jesus, taking advantage of people in need was as awful if it occurred in the street or in the Temple. It didn’t matter whether the offender was a tax collector or a Temple priest. Jesus took his whip to the crooks in the Temple to make a simple statement: The Temple would be destroyed because those who controlled the religion of Israel had betrayed the people, the nation, and the nation’s God.

And Jesus claimed the authority of God.

What was the purpose of sacrifice? What brought about all this money-changing and animal-selling?

Sacrifice comes from words meaning “holy,” and “make.” Make holy. We sacrifice to atone for our sin – to make our lives holy. We sacrifice because in sin we are human. St. Paul speaks today to the dilemma of separating faith from daily life; he admits that while he tries to be spiritual, something is going on within him that seems to make him do the very thing he hates. St. Paul is really constructing what might be called a

“law of human nature.” We know what is right, yet we do wrong – and we attempt to put ourselves back into right relationship with God through sacrifice.

That’s what’s going on in Temple worship: people recognizing that they have gone against God’s holy law, yearning to return to right relationship with the Lord they worship.

The church must be very, very careful that we do not confuse the authority of the church with the authority of God. We must be very, very careful to hold the traditions of our liturgy and our reverence for Holy Scripture in tension with the authority of God and

God’s continued energetic creation.

Revelation did not stop when the Bible was put together back in the fourth century. In the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus wanted to put right the relationship of worship with our relationship with God. I believe that the God we worship is continually self-revealing – and God still loves us. God still loves us *despite* our sin. Jesus embraces us, broken in our relationships with God and with one another. Sin gone. Sin forgiven. Once and for all. Vanished. Slate wiped clean.

Today’s Gospel is about the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, but I suggest to you that it also points to us: That we all need to cleanse our own temples from time to time,

and Lent is a perfect opportunity to do that. We need to look deep within ourselves, examining that which is a bit dirty, a bit scary, a bit shameful, and offer our very *sin* up to God in Christ Jesus. We offer our sin in prayer, in confession, and in sacrifice. We pray to God to make us holy, to forgive us over and over, and God does just that. When we engage in some introspection, self-examination, we sometimes discover things about ourselves we're not very proud of — that's OK, God will wipe them away. God will make us clean and whole again, and draw us back into a loving relationship.

We are all human, made in God's image yet with human faults, for God gives us the grace

of free choice. We need to thoughtfully and prayerfully look at those faults and pray to God that they be corrected.

And, no matter what, thanks be to God, God still loves us recklessly, wildly, with great abandon. God gathers us into a loving embrace that heals us and draws us ever closer to the spirit of Christ Jesus. *Amen*