

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Eucharist or Communion in today's service has its basis in the Last Supper of our Lord, and that was based upon the ancient Jewish feast holiday of Passover.

The first Passover occurred in Egypt just before the Exodus. When the last plague brought death to the first born of Egypt, causing pharaoh to order the initial release of the Jews to their freedom, the Jews spread animal blood on their doorways so that the death would "pass over" their houses...bringing to them, and us, the word, "Passover". By the time of Jesus, Passover was one of three pilgrim holidays when all Jewish males...often with their families...wherever they were, had to travel to Jerusalem for this critical religious observance. Why? Passover required purification.

Purification meant everything to them. An elaborate system had been developed over the centuries which named some things "pure," and other things "impure." Women were impure for seven days after the birth of a son, fourteen days after the birth of a daughter. Dead bodies were impure. People with blemishes caused by leprosy and other diseases were impure. Certain foods were unclean. The list was very long.

Purification continues symbolically in our own worship service. You may not be able to see it where you sit. But, just before the Holy Eucharist or Communion, my finger tips are washed by water and dried by a towel before I touch the wafers of bread and administer Communion.

Well, the action in today's gospel reading takes place in the temple because the temple had become the center of the purity system through animal sacrifice. Jews who traveled long distances could not bring their animals with them...so, cattle, sheep and doves were sold outside in the Temple's court of the Gentiles, all according to one's ability to pay. Poor people who could hardly afford to give away a tenth of their crop found they were then unable to sell their grain for it was judged "impure." So, here it was...the great Temple, the very house of God, and within its Most Holy Place, the Ark of the Covenant with tablets of the Ten Commandments which we heard read earlier...and it had become a loud, smelly barnyard...and a bloody, stinking slaughterhouse.

The money-changers were central to this system. Roman coins, currency of the Empire, were considered impure and could not be used to buy sacrifices. These money-changers were not simply giving change for a twenty. They were giving "pure" tokens in exchange for "impure" money, usually for an extra fee.

Imagine an updated version in our church today.

Suppose that, as a condition to get to the altar for communion, you had to make an offering. But no payment by cash or check is allowed! Admission to the altar requires an offering in advance that must be made by a special credit card....and that special credit card can only be issued by a particular bank which has a sweetheart deal with the church..the bank making a 25% profit on the exchange of your money.

How would you like it if our ushers stood at the chancel steps, and stopped you from coming to the altar for Holy Communion, unless you deposited the required admission fee? Not much!

But that was taking place in the Temple. We understand foreign currency exchange rates, and how some commercial banks add a surcharge as the cost of doing business, but...for worshiping God? The whole thing was a mess....first the hassle of money extortion, then the haggling and bargaining for a pure, unblemished animal to get through the Temple inspectors, all surrounded by the noise and distraction of animal slaughter, blood, carcasses, and manure... Is it any wonder that the most devout Jew might have trouble actually worshiping in these conditions? Who could pray with all the bartering arguments going on?

So, sure...Jesus becomes angry, with real drama. Here at God's "Ground Zero". Where is the true worship? He threw out the money-changers, and came to the Temple to overturn every barrier that separates the people from God. He came into the Temple...not to be destructive or disruptive, but to eliminate the barriers that kept them from going back to the heart of God.

The temple could no longer serve as the dwelling place for God.

So, ask yourselves: What else....in the terms of conflict, or distraction, do you bring here, to this place, that causes barriers between your heart and God in this church? Do we put the effort of our presence in worshiping God, or is it in visitation with each other? Which do we do more, with better practice, and with more heart and gusto: Pray to God and get about doing the work that we are given to do, which is to love and serve God as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord? Or is it to assemble in this ornate clubhouse to chat it up with each other, to see and be seen, or just generally fulfill our duty to get up on a Sunday morning and get to church whether we like it or not?

What we should hope and pray for are ministries...whatever they are, paid or not....entered into and given to others with a full heart, with the commitment and dedication worthy of the gifts that God gives to us to use. Not going through the motions...because you and I can tell when someone is just going "through the motions". If I gave you some canned sermon, which did not

come from my heart, you would know it, I am sure...and you would call me out on it, I would hope. Going through the motions...even if I am paid to serve you. Does that make any difference?

The temple could no longer serve as the dwelling place for God. God's Spirit was no longer there. In this era of anything goes, we often do our best to forget that God can get angry. We do all our best to look away when God's face becomes the least bit clouded, and hear with all our might that God is love. Well, God is love, and loves us enough to get angry with us when we are bent toward our own self-destruction....so that God will not even have to punish us, as we do it to ourselves in spite of God's love for us.

The gospel reading for this third Sunday in Lent is a "woodshed" moment...and some in this congregation know what it means to be "taken to the woodshed". I find it remarkable, and ultimately most telling, that...even as angry as Jesus was, even as he must have known that this outburst would set the course of his death into motion...even then, in the process of his outrage, Jesus points to the replacement for the temple.

He himself would be the new temple. He would be the place where the encounter between the human and the divine takes place. That genuine and heart-felt worship begins when we come to him, because the ecology of worship is fragile and easily damaged. So the "cleansing of the temple", as this action is historically known, is really an ongoing challenge for us to restore the natural habitat of worshipping God. The ongoing challenge for the "cleansing of the temple"...residing in here.

We need to re-order the priorities of our lives....so that we are not cluttered with the busyness and stresses of life in order to get down to the center of who we are, and who we are called to be: a people who take...no, a people who make...the time to worship, to study, and to pray. Really, what else do we have to do that is so important...that is more important?

We may not think that highly of ourselves at times, and get mixed up into thinking that God would much rather have something other than our love and our faith. But sometimes we need something dramatic, like Jesus running amok in the temple, to remind us that God accepts no substitutes for a heart open to relationship with God. We waste the time that God gives us, and we do so at our own peril.

This "woodshed" moment is brought to us by the God who loves us anyway...thanks be to God...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen