

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25,
JOHN 2:13-22

“The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Good Morning!

This is my third week here as your deacon, but this is not my first time preaching at St. Barnabas. Perhaps some of you may remember when I preached at your recovery service a few years ago. And if you do, you know that my alcoholism is not a secret. Let me share a little bit more about my life. When I was just two weeks into a recovery program, my husband of 27 years walked out and moved in with a woman that he met at the bar that we had purchased two months earlier. Buying that bar was a very expensive venture and had put us deeply in debt. So after he left, I immediately started divorce proceedings and could not keep up with all the bills. It did not take too long before the house, the boat, and the bar were all gone. My one thought at the time was why is all of this happening to me? I could not see this as a sign for a complete transformation of my life. How often have you not seen the sign that was right in front of you?

The Jews who confronted Jesus were probably members of the temple police force, representatives from the Sanhedrin, or both. Arriving to investigate the commotion in the temple court, they demanded of Him, “What sign do You show us as Your authority for doing these things?” What was in front of their eyes did not speak loudly enough for them. They could not see the sign being given them in the here and now. While we may not express aloud very often our desire for a sign, I think this yearning is still present in us today, especially in crisis situations. Do we, like them, also lack a discerning heart when it comes to seeing God at work in the world around us?

It must have been some sight. With the crack of a whip, Jesus chased merchants from the temple. He drove out the oxen. He scattered the sheep. He turned the tables on the money changers, with coins jangling to the floor and rolling away. Single-handedly, Jesus swept the temple clean. The leaders looked at Him and said, “What sign will you show us, authorizing you to do these things?”

What sign will you show us? The fact is, Jesus was disrupting a very good system. After all, the leaders at the temple were concerned that everybody who came for worship was properly equipped. For anybody who wanted to offer a sacrifice to God, the appropriate animal was available at the temple. For anybody without much money wishing to offer thanks to God, a couple of inexpensive doves were available at the temple. For anybody who needed to change common Roman currency into Jewish temple money, money-changers were available at the temple. How convenient this system was! You could travel these long, dusty miles to the holy city with never a worry about dragging along your own ox or sheep. You did not have to fret about bringing along exact change. If you wanted to be religious, the religious system provided everything. It was a good system, until Jesus came and tossed over the tables and spilled the

whole system onto the floor. The leaders looked at Him and said, “What sign can you show us, authorizing you to do these things? Show us a sign of your authority!”

Obviously they saw Him as an upstart, a rabble-rouser. In the Gospel of John, this is the first time Jesus confronts organized religion on its own turf. Up to this point He was collecting disciples and attending wedding receptions. Now for the first time in this gospel, Jesus meets a religious system of rituals and sacrifices and He disrupts it, shooing away the animals and throwing the money boxes on the stone floor. No wonder the religious leaders insist, “Give us a sign authorizing you to do this.” Who does Jesus think He is? What are His credentials? What seminary did He attend? Where is His diploma? What makes Him think He can march into the temple and smash the system to bits?

In the other Gospels, this story is told as if it happened much later in Jesus’ life. When Jesus cleanses the temple in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the authorities say, “This is the last straw, Jesus must be eliminated.” The cleansing of the temple provoked such hostility among the religious leaders that it led to their final confrontation with Jesus, namely His death. Yet in the Fourth Gospel, John tells the story as early as chapter two, as if to say that from the beginning of His ministry, Jesus took on organized religion. In fact, throughout this gospel, Jesus distances Himself from Judaism. Jesus is presented as questioning and replacing the Jewish institutions and rituals of His day.

No wonder the Jewish leaders said, “Give us some proof, show us a sign.” I wonder if they knew what they were asking for. The word “sign” is a loaded term in the Gospel of John. Immediately before this story, Jesus turned water into wine. The writer calls that a “sign.” It was more than a miracle. It was a prophetic statement against organized religion.

You may remember the story. There was a wedding party in Cana. The caterer ran out of wine. Jesus saw six stone jars, each large enough to hold twenty or thirty gallons of liquid. “Fill them with water,” He said, “and ladle some out.” In went the water. Out came fine tasting wine. On went the party. The only problem had to do with the six stone jars. They were usually filled with water for purification ceremonies, for the ritual of cleansing of dirty Jewish hands and Jesus filled them with Manishewitz. Now, how disrespectful was that?

To put it in terms of something that is easier for us to relate to, think of this. What if a party was being held in the fellowship hall and someone accidentally slips and smashes the punch bowl on the floor. And then someone else says, “Don’t panic. I know what we can use.” He enters the sanctuary, hoists up the baptismal font and carries it into the fellowship hall. Then the caterers fill it with Canada Dry and cranberry juice, and the font becomes a punch bowl. Now that would be disrespectful, just like what Jesus did at the wedding in Cana.

At Jesus’ command, the Jewish purification jars became carafes of new wine. The writer adds, “This was the first sign Jesus performed.” That sign stood over against all established customs. So when Jesus cleansed the temple, and the leaders said, “Show us a sign” I wonder if they knew what they were asking for. Whether or not they did, Jesus gave His reply. “Do you really want a sign?” He asked. “Yes,” they replied, “show us a sign.” Jesus answered, “Then destroy this entire temple.”

Now wait a minute. No one said anything about destroying the temple. All the people wanted to know is why He chased away the animals. But destroy the sanctuary? The temple was the meeting place. The temple was the one spot in heaven and earth where God meets

people in worship. And Jesus dared them to destroy it? It had taken forty-six years to build that temple. Did Jesus think He could destroy the center of their religious traditions?

It takes time to build traditions. They do not grow overnight. We need to plant them, water them, and give them time to grow. Once they take root, we need to do what we can to maintain them. How many of us send money every year to the college or university that we graduated from to help them maintain their tradition. Sending the money has become our tradition. Traditions hold deep personal meaning. They order our lives. They give us stability. They teach us the most comforting words ever spoken: “We’ve always done it that way.”

How often have we heard that said in church? “We’ve always done it that way.” Music in the Episcopal Church has a long history of following the traditional hymnal. And it seems to be the one thing that drives young people away from the church. In fact it has been hard for some churches to even use the *Lift Every Voice and Sing* Hymnal. What do you mean, we have to sing Negro spirituals? That is not the way it has always been done. At St. Alban’s church, they have a choir comprising men from other denominations who sing once a month. And they have a different organist for that choir who comes from the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination bringing some very different and uplifting music. On my first Sunday here, I attended the 5:30 pm service with the music provided by a young praise band. They had guitars, drums, and a screen to show the words to the songs. To set up their equipment, they had to move some things around and we had to adapt the service to fit with the surroundings. The sermon was not done from the pulpit and communion was not done at the altar rails. Yet, there was something very spiritual about that service. It was great to see so many young people from multiple denominations in church. Would they have been there if we insisted on doing things the way they have always been done?

So in other words, they said, “Jesus, it has taken forty-six years to build this temple; and you challenge us to destroy it?”

Jesus said, “Yes, I do.”

“But Jesus, it has taken forty-six years.”

“Destroy this temple,” He said, “and in three days I will raise it up.”

What was Jesus talking about? Was He speaking about our need to cleanse our institutions, both large and small? It sounds that way. It may be time to be cleansed of those habits and practices that can become small religions in themselves: Like providing sacrificial animals for the convenience of worshipers, or giving money-changers a table in the narthex. Perhaps Jesus wants us to purge ourselves of a thousand rituals that can take on a life of their own.

Such radical change will not happen easily. Religious folks like us have a boundless ability to establish routines and rituals. Should anyone dare to disrupt our traditions, one of us will always say, “It has taken forty-six years to establish these things.” So we might grimace at this story’s implication, that, like it or not, we are called to be a church reformed and still being reformed, in the name of Jesus who cleansed the temple.

Yet, there is something more for us to hear in this story. When Jesus cleansed the temple, His opponents wanted a sign. To meet their request, He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” According to the early church, Jesus was not merely talking about the Jerusalem temple and its traditions. He was pointing to Himself.

You see, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is the one who demands our attention. Jesus does not need the temple. In this gospel, every time Jesus encounters the traditions, the routines, and the religious procedures of Israel, He ignores them because they do not apply to Him. That is, Jesus does not need the temple, because, according to John, Jesus is the Temple. He is the meeting place between God and humanity. He is the one with whom all of us have to deal. It does not matter if we have a vague hunger for something spiritual or if we live by well-defined systems of sacrifice and devotion. Jesus Christ is the one who reveals God in mercy and truth.

As proof, Jesus revealed the one sign that will abolish the over-organization of religion. He offered His own death and resurrection. "Destroy this temple," He said, "and in three days I will raise it up!" Jesus was destroyed, as you know, and He was also raised up:

Raised up on the cross to draw all people to Himself

Raised up from the grave to draw near to all people through His Spirit

Raised up to God's right hand, with authority to forgive the sins of the world, your sins and mine.

So beware, if you are a keeper of empty rituals and confining religious systems, Jesus Christ is alive, and the one thing He comes to do is to bring people into the holy presence of God. Who knows? Someday you might find Him flipping over the neat, tidy tables of your life. Without warning, you may hear Him shooing away your expensive sacrifices. You could even see Him throw your treasures to the floor where they jangle away. If that ever happens, you might feel like saying, "Jesus, what gives you the right to reform my religion? What gives you the right to reform my life? What sign do you offer?"

Beware of His reply. The sign He will offer you is the sign He has always offered. Instead of a safe, cozy, convenient religion, Jesus will come and offer Himself.

In the name of the one Holy and Living Lord, Amen.

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