

March 7, 2021

Lent 3

John 2:13-20/1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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My second call was to a congregation in Casper, Wyoming. At the time, the state was between the last oil boom and the coming natural gas boom, so it was a much smaller city than it is now. It was a good place to live, lots of wonderful people and a great congregation. It was the early 90's, before satellite radio, and so what was there to listen to in Casper? Country music, of course--Brooks and Dunn, Alan Jackson, the Chicks etc.

I know I'm going to lose some of you right here, but I grew to like the music, not all the time, but sometimes. Every now and then today, I find myself turning on the Garth Channel on Sirius, and I think I know why: because most of the time, country songs tell a story. Some of them are ridiculous, like the old joke that every country song has to include a wife leaving, a dog dying, and a truck that won't start. There are still some songs like that, and plenty of drinking ditties, but many songs can go deep describing the human condition--situations and emotions we're all familiar with, like regret, grief, joy, love, anger, and hope. The stories in the songs often resolve themselves beautifully, or sometimes they are left open-ended, with us left to wonder what happened.

I wonder what country music would make of a scene like the one in today's Gospel? It's got all the elements: one man swaggers into the Temple and starts a path of destruction, flipping over tables, challenging authority, and frightening everyone. The whip of cords is a powerful addition, and we could imagine the chorus might include something like "Get out, get out, it ain't supposed to be like this!"

This story from Jesus' life and ministry is included in all four Gospels. How do you imagine the scene? The area around the Temple was huge--about the size of 6 football fields put together. Herod the Great had begun a restoration project there almost 50 years before and it was still ongoing. Marble, gold, gigantic stones

reaching stories high--imagine making the trek to Jerusalem from a small outlying village, and how fantastic it must have all seemed.

During the Festival of the Passover, the population of the city would have swelled to hundreds of thousands. People were crowded together in the Temple courtyard, looking to buy the animals they needed for sacrifice as prescribed by Jewish religious law, and to also pay the Temple tax. Coins that showed the head of Caesar were unclean and had to be exchanged for the Temple shekel. Sometimes we imagine this as an appalling scene before Jesus arrived that day. But can you envision something different? Not only the noise, the hub-bub, but also the joy, really--at coming together as families and friends to *the* place where God dwelled? Imagine what it will be like when you can come to this sanctuary again to worship, and you've got a piece of it.

Into all of this comes Jesus like a whirlwind. The Temple, the sacrifices, the Passover celebration--all of it was prescribed, celebrated even in the Hebrew scriptures as a way of strengthening and deepening a relationship with God. But something had gone sideways which made Jesus turn over tables and drive those selling and exchanging out. What do you think happened?

Well, what gets in the way of your relationship with God? What limits your trust in Christ? Take a minute to think about it...I could guess right away at some examples common to all of us, but it probably has more impact if you do the thinking...What gets in your way?

Often it's ourselves, isn't it--and our need to have control over our own lives. So we place God somewhere "over there," away from us, well-contained--calling on God only when we need something. Or maybe it's the outsized importance of the trappings of faith: a particular building, a favorite pew, the 'right' music, things which--to us--can't ever be changed. Or we come to think of faith as a transaction between us and Christ: "I'll do all of this, Jesus, (be good, serve, give) and *then* you will do this for me." Can you feel how flat, how lifeless that kind of faith can become?

It was all of these behaviors that angered Jesus that day in the Temple courtyard. What was meant to be a joyful, life-giving relationship with God was so diminished and so overshadowed. How could one love and serve God and neighbor with a full and open heart while having such a constricted faith?

During this Lenten season we might ask ourselves that question, too. After all, we know the ending of *this* particular story, as Paul reminds us today: the cross-- a symbol of death and destruction--is where new life has broken into the world. It seems ridiculous, Paul says, to say that love won on the hill outside Jerusalem.

The foolishness of the cross shows Christ's amazing, unconditional love, which reaches out to each of us and all humanity. If we want a picture of the very heart of God, look to the cross. We don't need to control, satisfy, or create God. We are simply invited to be embraced and shaped by the love of Christ.

Embraced--to know whose we are; **shaped**--to become those who serve and live that love.

Hymns and songs shape our faith. The next hymn tells a story, if you listen as we all sing it. It's a story of worship, love, and service--all ways we live out our realization that Christ has loved us first.