



God dwells in you

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Third Sunday in Lent,

March 7, 2021

John 2:13-25

If I were to ask you what kind of person you think Jesus of Nazareth was, I think most of us would say something about love. We know he was a healer. We know his primary teaching was about loving God, loving our neighbors. In fact in the Episcopal Church we distill millennia of Christian faith into seven spiritual practices that refer to in total as Jesus' Way of Love. But the Jesus portrayed in today's gospel may not appear that loving. In fact he kind of raises our eyebrows. As Rex read a minute ago, Jesus walks into the temple and throws the place into chaos. He makes a whip and drives out all the animals that had been there for purchase to be sacrificed at the Passover festival. He rudely tips over the tables where people are sitting to make change for purchasing these animals. This is not a

“nice” Jesus. He says, Stop making my Father’s House a marketplace. This would sort of be like Jesus waltzing into the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome when the Pope is presiding, and tipping over the thurible, making a mess of the altar vestments, wreaking havoc with the acolytes, and upsetting the ushers. Why would he do this?

The thing is, the moneychangers and the animals being sold were there in the Temple legitimately. This was the annual celebration of the Passover, when the Jewish people celebrated that God had liberated them from slavery in Egypt many centuries before. These animal sacrifices were part and parcel of the way God had commanded Israel to honor the Passover and a lot of the rest of how they practiced their religion. They were all just there doing what the law required of them to be faithful Jews. The Temple itself was the place where God’s presence was believed to be concentrated. But Jesus comes in and throws the whole system into turmoil. Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace, he says. He is full of zeal, and maybe even anger. Why would he do that?

To understand this I hope you’ll forgive a little historical detour. John’s gospel was probably written later than any of

the other gospels, after Jerusalem had been destroyed. Rome and Israel had been in conflict for several hundred years, and finally Rome utterly crushed Jerusalem, killed or enslaved most of its inhabitants, and burned the Temple to the Ground. A 4th century historian said more than a million Jews were killed in the process – and even though modern scholars think this was an exaggeration, the point is that it was a horrific slaughter. Everyone who survived fled the country. After that Rome allowed Jews to practice their religion in peace as long as they stayed away from their homeland and kept their religion out of politics. But as Christians and Jews increasingly split from each other, Rome considered Christians a new threat to crush, so Christians now had to fear the Empire, as well as their fellow Jews. Over the millennia since, many Christians have used this and similar Bible stories to unjustifiably blame Jews for Christian suffering, and we should never discuss this history without denouncing that anti-semitism. But we can also see how traumatized those Christians at the time of John's gospel had been. They had lost their homeland. They had lost the Temple, their previous way of practicing their religion and being close to God. They were losing even their identity and community of fellow Jews in exile.

And into this pain and fear, the gospel of John is assuring them that the God who is made flesh in Jesus is still among them. Jesus' body is the Temple, Jesus is saying. The empire can lay out its worst violence and destroy everything you have held dear, except one thing: the fact of God's presence right here, in the flesh, because of Christ. God dwells, not in any building or any religious tradition, not even just in a metaphysical spirituality, but in people, in physical reality. That is what the "Incarnation" means. Jesus is showing us more than good teaching. He is showing us what God is like by turning hundreds of gallons of water into wine at an ordinary wedding. He multiplies scarce resources, like a few loaves and fish, to feed huge numbers of people. He confronts real storms and gives sight to the blind. And he raises the dead. So the utter paradox of John's gospel is that even in times when we lose everything, we can have life abundantly, to use John's language, because God is right here with us in the flesh, because we bring God with us in our bodies wherever we go.

John's gospel is showing us that even when the whole system crumbles around us—when we lose a half a million lives to COVID-19; when can't meet in the building for an entire year because of it; when democracy itself is at risk

because rioters storm the Capitol building; and when it feels like the entirety of our history of systemic racism itself is being put on trial along with Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis beginning tomorrow—the very Spirit of God which created the universe remains with us, closer than we have ever imagined, in our bodies and in the bodies of Christ around us in each other. Think about that. God’s being is love, and God’s love is always overflowing abundantly, and the overflow creates life and saves and heals. This is so holy and so sacred that it can never be reduced to transactions in the Temple where we try offering a quid pro quo in return for the favor of God. The very creative power of the universe is with us in our bodies. Let that heal what is hurt in you. Let that heal the places where you yourself have done the most damage. Let’s trust the Spirit of God to provide abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, even when so much is at stake and the losses in our nation are so high.

God has never lived in the Temple or any other building, and God cannot be contained within any religious structure or system, even the most sacred. Jesus felt so strongly about the need to insist on this that he was willing to be rude in the Temple—because then as now, nearly all of us get it

wrong. We are always tempted to believe that God is exclusively met through the beautiful traditions we can control and love. But Jesus knew how desperately we need to experience the presence of God OUTSIDE our building, because even our beloved buildings do not last forever.

This week, I know many of us are genuinely afraid. We are afraid that the legitimate anguish, grief and rage our nation feels over systemic racism will again explode in our city when the trial begins tomorrow. We are afraid of the violence that may ensue, especially if there is not justice in this situation. We are afraid that so many communities will continue to suffer the horrors of racism without hope or an end in sight. We're afraid because the pandemic is not over, and because of the true depth of our divisions. But as we face our fear, let us truly encounter the Jesus who is willing to throw the whole system out the window in order to say, even if the whole world is razed to the ground, I will raise it up in three days. Death and violence can never have the last word. The generative, liberating, healing love of God does.

So let us open our clenched fists and allow the love of God to pour through us, without seeking to hoard or possess it, resting in the trust that there will be an endless supply. Let

us pray for the healing of our nation and our city, and be willing to follow the Spirit's leading to make that healing a reality. Let us recognize that no matter what happens, we can have lives that are meaningful because we are seeking to participate in God's healing, God's justice, God's love, even if we seem to risk much by doing so. Let us allow Jesus to disrupt our own systems, our own temples, if this is where the Spirit of Christ is leading us or where life just seems to be taking us. Our sanctuary and our prayer book and traditions are beautiful, and I do love them. But they can't hold a candle to the God who dwells in every human being, in every living creature, and in each of you. **Amen.**