

An intolerable profanity

John 2:13-22

March 11, 2012

There is a common perception that our Bible tells the stories of two rather different Gods. There is the God of the Old Testament, a stern and unbending God, a judgmental and angry and punishing God, a God who discriminates, who chooses sides, who favors those he chooses and cares little for those he rejects. Then there is the God of the New Testament, the God revealed in the teaching and mission of Jesus, a God of love and mercy and forgiveness, a God who does not judge, a God who does not discriminate, a God who does not get angry.

That's the common perception, but I'm not buying it! There is certainly something new about the New Testament. something new about the Good News Jesus announces and embodies, but it is new not so much in the sense of being something different, but in the sense of inaugurating a new age, of opening a new act. It is a new act of creation from the God who has been creating all along, something new from the God who is always making things new, the opening of a new way into the life God has intended for us all along, a new chapter in the ongoing story of God and God's people, a new fulfillment of the promise God has been making from the beginning.

And what is that promise? It is salvation. It is shalom. It is the kingdom of God. It is life. For all. All of creation healed of its wounds and made whole.

I believe it is entirely unfair to make a sharp distinction between the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and Samuel and David and Elijah, and the God of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament God, the Lord, is described again and again as merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love. Lauren read from Exodus that the Lord does bring punishment on those who hate and reject him, but also that the Lord shows love to thousands of generations of those who love him and obey his law.

And Jesus did not shy away from talking about judgment. And Jesus got angry.

Jesus got angry with the religious leaders of his day, calling them hypocrites, saying they were like whitewashed tombs, bright and clean on the outside, but dead and decaying on the inside. He was angry with them for paying strict attention to trivial matters of law, while entirely neglecting the truly important things -- things like justice and mercy and honesty.

Jesus got angry when a group of people stood silent after he asked if they thought the Law permitted helping a man on the Sabbath. It wasn't a theoretical question! A man with a paralyzed hand was standing there among them and they stood silent, not one of them speaking up to say, "Of course, it is right to help this man. Of course, it is right to save this man if you can, even on the Sabbath!"

And then there was the time when a man with a terrible skin disease came to Jesus and said to him, "If you want to, you can make me clean." There is some dispute about Jesus' response. Some manuscripts of the gospel of Mark say that Jesus was filled with pity, while others say that Jesus was filled with anger.

If Jesus did in fact respond in anger, at what do you suppose that anger was directed? Surely not at the man himself for asking for help. Do you suppose Jesus' anger was directed at the disease itself, at the terrible disease that had robbed this man of dignity and human contact?

Or maybe was Jesus angry because the man had to say, "If you want to?" Do you suppose Jesus' anger was directed at the rejection and alienation and lack of compassion that had so destroyed this man's spirit that he could not assume that a man he believed could heal him would want to?

But of all the reports of Jesus' anger, the story we read from the gospel of John shows Jesus most animated, most demonstrative, most physical, in his anger. He made a whip out of pieces of rope and used it on the sheep and cattle -- not on the sellers, mind you! -- to drive the animals out of the Temple. He flipped over the tables of the moneychangers, scattering their coins everywhere. And he told the pigeon sellers: "Get them out!" Not "You get out!," but "Get them out!" "Get the pigeons out of the Temple."

What was it about that scene in the Jerusalem Temple that made Jesus so angry? Was he angry about greed, about graft, about price-gouging, about economic exploitation? No. Jesus was angry simply because what he saw there in the Temple was an intolerable profanity. The buying and selling, the exchanging of currency, was an intolerable profanity.

Profane means the opposite of sacred. It doesn't necessarily mean something dirty or vulgar, but something common, something ordinary, something not set aside for a special, sacred purpose. Something is a profanity when it mixes or confuses the two, the sacred and the profane.

It is a profanity to take God's name in vain, to use God's name for evil purposes, to put it to common and vulgar use as an exclamation of disgust or to use it as a means of promoting my own agenda. It is a profanity to pull God down, to treat the holy God with carelessness and disrespect, and it is a profanity to lift up anything which is not God into God's place, to treat as sacred something that is in fact profane.

This was the profanity Jesus saw in the Temple -- something profane where it didn't belong. The issue wasn't greed or price gouging or anything inherently evil about money. The issue was simply commerce itself, commerce where it didn't belong. Jesus is not against commerce per se, against buying and selling and changing money per se, but Jesus is against commerce here. Not here! Not here!

There are limits. There are boundaries. There are times and places and things which must remain set apart, must remain sacred. There are times and places and things that are sacred! Times and places and things that belong to God. Times and places and things that belong only to God. Actually, all times and all places and all things belong to God, but reserving some as sacred serves us as a reminder, a vital reminder, of that fact.

We live in a culture without limits. There are no boundaries. Commerce is everywhere! Everywhere, everything, everybody, every day, every moment is about buying and selling.

Our lives are deluged to the extreme with messages to buy. Turn on the TV and you'll see an endless stream of commercials with short programming breaks in between. Boot up your computer screen and you'll see the same thing -- pop up ads, bottom of the screen ads, sidebar ads everywhere. Ninety percent of the mail in my mailbox is advertisement. Ninety percent of the email in my e-mailbox is advertisement.

Buy, buy, buy! Buy to make your life good. Buy to make your life full and worthwhile. Buy to bring your life joy. It is a profanity!

Everything is monetized. Do you know that word? It means to turn something, anything, into a way of making money. I was reading a story the other day about the retirement of extreme kayaker Tao Berman who has paddled over 96' waterfalls among other feats, but his true feat, his true genius, according to the article, was his acumen for monetizing his sport, to make money, good money, by paddling.

Everything is about the money. Politics is about the money, about who has it and how to get it from those who have it and how to stay on the good side of those who have it and how to make more money for those who have it.

Entertainment is about the money. Sports is about the money. The Indianapolis Colts let go the face of their franchise this week, to avoid paying him the \$28 million they would owe him if he stayed.

Religion is about the money. Is it? Sometimes it is, and when it is, it is an intolerable profanity!

It's all about the money. Buying and selling and making money is what it's all about. It's what life is for. It's the lifeblood of our society. It's the foundation of our civilization. But when it is all about the money, money becomes no longer merely a tool, one tool, in the service of human welfare, but instead, human beings become the tools in the service of producing wealth. Money becomes not our servant, but our master, and that is a profanity, because we have only one true master.

As people of God, as people set apart and called for a distinctive purpose, we have to define limits, we have to set boundaries, we have to put money in its place. We cannot let it be where it doesn't belong.

That's what a sabbath is about. Not today!

That's what Lent is about. It's what fasting or doing without or withdrawing is about -- reminding myself, reminding ourselves, that every good gift comes from God, that we depend day by day and moment by moment on God, not on ourselves, not on what we can achieve or acquire, not on things, not on money.

It's about creating and preserving sacred times, sacred places, sacred things. It's about remembering that God, and God alone, belongs at the heart of things, in the heart of us, and that anything that tries to take that place is a profanity.

But there is one more thing to say, one more deeper meaning to Jesus' anger, a meaning to which Jesus himself gives the clue. After Jesus had driven the cattle and sheep and pigeons from the Temple and taken out the booths of the moneychangers, the Jewish authorities asked him: "What miracle can you perform to show us that you have the right to do this?" And Jesus replied: "Tear down this Temple, and in three days I will build it again."

They thought he was talking about the building they were in, Herod's Temple, the building that had taken forty-six years to erect, but, of course, he was talking about his body. The Temple of which Jesus spoke was his own body.

But we are Christ's body! So what is the Temple? Us! What is the Father's house, the Father's proper dwelling place? Us!

Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!

Are you, are we, a marketplace? Can you, can we, be bought and sold?

What would you give, what would you do, for money? For financial gain? For financial security? To make sure you and yours had enough? To make sure you and yours had more than enough?

What compromises would you be ready to make? What would you be ready to sacrifice? Whom would you be ready to sacrifice?

What pain and suffering would you be prepared to overlook? What pain and suffering and injustice would you be ready to turn your back to?

To whom or to what would you be ready to suck up? In what or in whom would you be ready to believe? In what or in whom would you be ready to put your trust?

It's a profanity! An intolerable profanity!

We are Christ's body! We are the temple of the living God! So drive out the sheep and the cattle and the pigeons! Clear out the buying and the selling and the wanting! Overturn the tables of the stockbrokers and the bankers and the money managers! Turn off the TV and shut down your computer!

All these things have their proper time and their proper place, but not in your heart! Not at our heart! Our heart belongs to God, to no one and to nothing else -- not to things, not to money, not to any person, not to any country, not to anything else.

Protect that sacred space, the space that is reserved for God alone, the space that is you. Protect it with all the passion and all the fervor, and even all the anger, that Jesus had.