

**March 4, 2018**  
**The Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration)**  
**The Rev. Keri T. Aubert**  
**St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT**

**Exodus 20:1-17**  
**Psalm 19**  
**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**  
**John 2:13-22**

When you think of Jesus, how do you picture him? Maybe you see him standing tall and youthful, holding a shepherd's crook and carrying a lamb over his shoulders. Or maybe he is sitting relaxed on a rock, surrounded by children and telling a story. I don't know about you, but when I imagine Jesus, I don't generally think of him slashing a whip and tossing a table, goading animals and humans alike with the energy of his anger.

We're used to a Jesus who is calm, and maybe even a little cool. When we talk about the passion of Jesus, we are usually referring to his death, which he seemed to accept passively. But today we hear about a Jesus who is passionate in life, animated and active. Today we hear about a Jesus who is revved up enough to commit an act of civil disobedience, something that the authorities surely would not have missed and certainly could not have ignored.

The scene in the Temple would have been chaotic even before Jesus waded in. Passover was one of three major feasts that Jews would have commemorated with a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple. The entire city would have been crowded; the Temple grounds would have been overflowing.

Animals used for the required Temple sacrifices had to be "unblemished." Travel would have been too hard on them, so pilgrims had to purchase them when they arrived. To pay the required Temple taxes, pilgrims needed to change their Roman coins, which bore the image of the emperor, for coins that were image-free.

Participation in the Temple system had probably become a habit that few people even thought to question. It was, on the surface at least, a system from which everyone benefited. The people fulfilled their religious duties. The priests and other Temple authorities received support in the form of money from the tax and meat from the sacrificial animals. The vendors and moneychangers made a profit on the commerce.

Dig a little deeper, and the benefits are not quite so clear. The Temple wasn't just a center of religion; it was a center of sociopolitical power. The Temple system helped Jewish leaders accumulate wealth at the expense of others, including the rural poor.<sup>1</sup> Temple leaders could compel this, because they were in effect brokers of the people's relationships with God. God was said to be present in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred location at the center of the Temple, which only priests could enter. Right relationship with God therefore necessitated priestly mediation and animal sacrifices and Temple taxes.

Jesus was angry, because of the commerce conducted in the Temple, because of the acquisition of wealth and power in the name of God. *And*, I think there's more. Part of the system that Jesus disrupts is the basic concept of how people access God. Jesus seems to be doing away with the entire process of priestly mediation, and the entire system of rules and compliance. Instead of all that, there's only Jesus, through whom God reaches out, directly and intimately.

It seems to me that any religious system focused on rules and compliance can easily lure people into false notions about what it means to be in relationship with God. I am your priest, but I am not in charge of your relationship with God; that relationship is your responsibility. For your relationship with God, there is no rulebook and no referee. There is no bank book of accounts owed and paid. Your access to God is not brokered by any worldly power. My job is not to throw up roadblocks on your path to God. I suspect that my job is rather to help throw them down. I think that's your job, too. Your work in the world as Christians is to help throw down roadblocks to the fullness of life that God promises to every one of us, and to every one of our neighbors.

Look around and you can see vivid reminders of how much of our time and money and energy it takes to sustain our operative model of Christ's church. A lot of the money goes to paying me. It can be very tempting for me to understand my job as continuing the system that gets me paid. But I'm pretty sure that's not what Jesus would say. If the cleansing of the Temple is an indication, Jesus would say something very different, indeed. Jesus might even point to me as the central sinner.

Let me clarify: we are blessed to have a beautiful building and beautiful worship. There is nothing wrong with these things. But they are not the end; they are the means to an end. Therefore we have to be clear that we're sustaining our life together *not simply* for the purpose of *sustaining our life together*. That's not what saves you; that's not what saves the world.

During Lent, we seek reconciliation for our sin, because that sin separates us from God. And as you may have heard me say before, it's not just about sin we have committed. It's also about sin that has been committed against us, because *that* sin separates us from God.

Every Sunday, but especially during Lent, the church provides a space for us to bring it all forward, to lay it down on this altar, and to leave it there. We leave at the altar not our sacrifices of cattle, sheep, and doves, but our sacrifices of all the things that separate us from God, all the things that keep us from following Jesus' call. *Together* we break them open, so that from them may spring love and compassion, for God and for ourselves and for our neighbors. God's restoring grace is with each and every one of us, personally and thoroughly. Through God's grace, we are healed. Through God's grace, as the Body of Christ, we help heal others.

This may be the very core of what St. Thomas's is all about. I suppose it's what Christianity is supposed to be all about, but so often isn't. Just how uniquely true it is to St. Thomas's was impressed upon me yet again just yesterday, during your recently-elected vestry's all-day retreat. In the spirit of "retreating" we met offsite, ut we didn't go too far: in the spirit of ecumenical cooperation, we met just down the street, at First Presbyterian Church.

A retreat allows a group to set aside usual business to focus on unusual business, of which we had an agenda-full. There is an old Yiddish proverb: People plan and God laughs. God laughed a little yesterday, as our plans gave way to something even less related to business as usual, something more important than any sort of business at all. As the day progressed, God laughed with us, and God cried with us.

I can't offer details, but I can say that we talked about our work in the Church as spiritual practice. And we talked about our experience of this place as one of safety. This safe space, this community, this spiritual center, is one not of separation, but of invitation; not of rigidity, but of accommodation; not of judgment, but of peace. This understanding, often felt more than thought, is much of reason we are so committed to St. Thomas's. We might even think of it as the practice of a type of spirituality that every one of us can make our own.

If that's true, it can't be because of our beautiful building or our beautiful worship. It can't be because of me; I haven't been here long enough. It can only be explained one way: God is at work here, through each and every one of you.

By the time John's Gospel was written down, the Romans had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. In John's Gospel, the new Temple is the body of the resurrected Christ. But remember this: **we** are the body of the resurrected Christ. **We** are the new Temple, the *ambulatory* location of the Holy of Holies, the living residence of the living God. Here, God is with us. Wherever we march, stroll, roll, tiptoe, or toddle, God is with us. May God heal us and bless us and fill us, with love and courage and passion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 74.