

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 8, 2015
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19:7-14
Romans 7:13-25
John 2:13-22

The story in our Gospel lesson today dramatically illustrates how the different Gospel writers use the events of Jesus' life to communicate a specific message for a specific audience or faith community.

All four Gospels tell this story, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it near the very *end* of Jesus' ministry. In fact, for them it is this angry demonstration by Jesus in the temple which becomes the deciding factor in the decision by the authorities to kill Jesus.

John also links this story to Jesus' death, locating it within the context of Passover (cf. v. 13; cf. also John 19:31-37). But John places the story at the very *beginning* of Jesus' ministry, here in chapter two.

What is John trying to say by placing this story here at the beginning of things rather than at the end of things?

The context may help us here. A very important event happens here in John chapter 2 -- do you remember what it is? It is the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where Jesus turns the water into wine.

Do you remember how the story plays out? There were six large stone jars filled with water, and when the wine ran out Jesus instructed the steward to fill the stone jars with water and to taste it. When he did so, he discovered it had become wine!

But the small detail we must not miss is that those stone jars were used for the rites of *purification*.

By the time of Jesus, an elaborate system of purification had developed where some things were considered pure and others impure.

Women were impure seven days after the birth of a son, and 14 days after the birth of a daughter. People with blemishes or skin diseases (such as we've read about in Mark's Gospel) were impure and were isolated from others. Many foods were considered impure. Most things sexual were impure. And dead bodies were a real "no no."

What you had then was an elaborate system that had arisen which drew sharp social boundaries between people. Clear lines of demarcation were drawn between Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, pure and impure, righteous and sinners.

And guess what became the heart and soul of this "purity system?" The Temple. The house of God. The sacred place of prayer and worship.

Jewish people were required to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to offer sacrifices in the temple. And if you have to travel large distances, it would be impractical and cost prohibitive to bring animals with you. So there were businessmen who would sell you your sacrificial animals once you arrived. These animals had to be perfect, however, which meant that they were also expensive. Many poor people could not afford them.

Further, it would be idolatrous to purchase these animals with Roman coins, because the emperor's image was stamped on them. So there were money changers who offered to "exchange" your currency for Jewish currency -- for a price, of course.

So, the social boundaries continue to be sharply drawn through this purity system, and the locus of much of this activity was the temple.

Now, when Jesus turns the water into wine, it's not just for the purpose of "keeping the party going." John seems to tell us that Jesus is challenging the entire "purity system" that has grown up which keeps some out while allowing others in. Jesus is challenging the whole system of rules that names some people and things *impure* and others *pure*.

I have often read this story and been a little troubled, because it reveals a Jesus who becomes white hot angry. This is not the sterile, antiseptic image of Jesus taking little children upon his lap or reaching out to touch those who are

captive to their inner and outer demons. This is a human Jesus, a Jesus whose nerves are scraped raw by persons who are treating others like a fast food meal over which they are too busy to pray.

I used to think this was a story about Jesus' disruptive anger. But more and more, I see it now as a story of Jesus' disruptive *compassion*.

Jesus has come to challenge the religious establishment which has gotten away from the heart of its calling -- namely, Exodus 20 and the Decalogue. This entire "purity system" which found expression here in the temple was a gross corruption of what God had in mind for the people of Israel when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

God rescued the people from slavery and then gave them the commandments so that they could be his redeemed people. So that they could live in a loving relationship with their Creator and with one another in true communal life. Relationships would be loving, just, and compassionate. And God would be priority in all things.

I think John tells this story at the beginning of his Gospel to remind us that Jesus came to overturn and challenge the conventional way things are done. **He came to challenge the ways we typically see others and the world.**

And he came to remind us that the "rules" which form the Christian faith are set firmly within a context of a loving relationship -- a relationship with the God

who has saved and rescued us. (cf. Structure of Exodus; redemption precedes revelation...)

In this act of disruptive compassion, Jesus is challenging persons to return to the first commandment. To put God first, to cast away their idols of greed, money, and status. To live in compassionate relationships as God designed them to do.

And in challenging them, Jesus challenges us as well. This Lenten season affords us the opportunity to examine our own hearts, to ask ourselves whether God is truly first in our lives. To ask ourselves whether *relationships* are as important as *rules* when it comes to the living out of our faith, or whether we have established our own “purity system.”

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let us come with thanks for the “disruptive compassion” of Jesus. For that compassion has found us, and because of it we are welcome at this Table this morning.

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