

3 March 2024, 3 Lent B
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

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

Overturing Tables

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

You've heard this so many times that I'm loathed to say it again. You know that constant lament about the Church.

“No one goes to Church anymore.”

“The Church is shrinking.”

“The Church is dying.”

Many people have spent and still spend a lot of time and brain power figuring out how to turn this tide. More accurately, many people spend a lot of time and energy trying to figure out what program will suddenly make droves of parents and young children and young adults fill church sanctuaries to bursting. There is no magic program. If there were, everyone would have implemented it.

Why has Church attendance been falling? I have one answer for you, a controversial one: We, religious people, are the problem.

In surveys asking about Americans' perception of Christians, the consistent response, especially among youth and young adults, is that Christians are judgmental and hypocritical. Asked to elaborate, many point to the fact that many Christians do not include and respect the dignity of LGBTQ+ people, ordain women and LGBTQ+ clergy, allow “others” into church leadership, or

bless same-sex marriages. These are just examples of why Christians are seen as judgmental and hypocritical.

It's not, as some would claim, about failing to accede to the latest progressive fads. Too many Christians claim to profess that God is loving and that God is love while preaching that LGBTQ+ people and others are excluded from God's love. Some go as far as to declare that the God who is love, in fact, hates certain people. Others "love the sinner and hate the sin," declaring that "those" people must change before they can fully access the Church and God's love. Too many Christians claim that God created everyone in God's divine image while limiting that divine image to include only white, male, straight, and so called able-bodied. Too many Christians claim that we all sin and need God's salvation and then get on their high horse, ignore their own sin, and yet shame others when they fall short. Too many Christians declare that all are welcome but only make space for a select few.

I can hear you about to jump out of your seats. That's not us! We believe in inclusion of all people. We ordain women, LGBTQ+ people, and all kinds of people. Right here at St. John's, you have an African American Puerto Rican queer priest – admittedly with male privilege. We proclaim that we walk the walk of loving and advocating for all people. That is true. And yet, we are still part of the problem.

Too often, we sit in our buildings expecting those outside simply to know that we love and welcome all people while others out there spread harmful messages. We become complicit in those harmful messages when we don't speak out against them and when we do not actively engage in repenting of past wrongs and seeking reconciliation.

I love today's juxtaposition of the Ten Commandments from Exodus and Jesus going ham in the Temple. Our lessons begin with the dramatic, climactic moment of God's speaking to Moses what we have come to call the Ten Commandments. Our focus is drawn instantly to the list of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." That's easy. Do this. Don't do that. But why does God give the Israelites these laws?

"I am [the I AM,] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God introduces Godself by the divine name, and reminds the Israelites that God is the one who freed them. Embedded in this identification is the explanation for the Law. God has led them into freedom. They are meant to be free. These laws are designed to help them keep the

freedom God has given them by establishing how they are to relate to God and to one another.

In our Gospel lesson, we get Jesus in the Temple. The general story is familiar: Jesus overturns tables and flings a whip around as he chastises those in the Temple for turning this sacred place into a marketplace. Today, we get John's version of the story. We have some things to chat about.

"The Jews." The Greek words often translated as "the Jews" comes up around 70 times in John, and, while not true in every instance, often John's Gospel is hostile to this group. This seeming hostility to "the Jews," especially in the Passion narrative we read on Good Friday, has given rise to unjustified and reprehensible antisemitism based on the misguided and erroneous statement that "the Jews killed Jesus."

That antisemitism is flatly wrong. All Christians have an obligation to repent of it and seek reconciliation and healing with our Jewish siblings. That antisemitism is also born of failing to understand the context in which we believe John was written and how this term is used in John.

We think John was written at a time of considerable strife between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the rest of the Jewish community. This seems to have been a period in which those two groups separated, and this context may account for some of the hostility to "the Jews" in John.

There is also the fact that the Greek words translated as "the Jews" could refer to several possible groups of people. They can refer to the Jewish people generally, Judeans or people living in Judah, and/or the Jewish religious authorities. In fact, John's use of these words seems to have different meaning in different contexts throughout the Gospel.

In today's Gospel lesson, I think John is referring to the Jewish religious authorities, the people in charge of what goes on in the Temple. And I think we should see those Jewish religious authorities, whom Jesus chastises for their hypocrisy, in ourselves. They are like the Christians I spoke about earlier.

In John, the Temple incident happens early in Jesus' ministry. It comes right after Jesus performs his first "sign" by changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Jesus' point doesn't require a lot of analysis. The very people who are responsible for ensuring that Temple practices are followed, the very people who exclude others from the Temple because disability

supposedly makes them sinful and unclean, the very people who are all about utmost holiness and strict adherence to the Law are the same people allowing the Temple to be a marketplace – I'll add a marketplace in which others were probably taken advantage of.

These religious folk were great at pointing out and shaming others for supposed sins, but they would not dare reflect on their own sin. These religious folk enforced the parts of the Torah that worked for them and ignored the parts that didn't serve their purposes. These religious folk were more focused on making sure you knew that they were holier than you than they were on caring for the least among them or loving their neighbor.

The Christians I spoke about earlier are these religious folk. The ones who declare queer identities created by God to be sinful. The ones who judge and chastise others' sexual morality while engaging in conduct they assert is sinful. The ones who declare that women have no place in Church leadership while ignoring the examples of women Church leaders in the Bible and in Church history. The ones who trot out the Bible to justify their political positions against reproductive rights and care for transgender people while ignore the parts about welcoming the stranger, demanding freedom for the oppressed, and loving all people. The ones who are quick to declare their own holiness in contrast to the sinfulness of others. These Christians are just like the Temple religious leaders, doing one thing while preaching another.

Those of us who do not hold these positions are too often complicit in this message – myself included. Too often, we are bystanders in the Temple, but we are called to be Jesus. We are called to turn things upside down. We are called to get a little loud. We are called to proclaim God's love for all people. We are called to proclaim that God created gay, lesbian, ace, black, brown, male, female, trans, non-binary, all races, all genders, all sexual orientations, all bodies, all people – and God proclaimed all that God created in God's infinite love good! We are called to proclaim that identities are not sinful and that to say otherwise violates God's commandment to love God and to love one another. We are called to proclaim that God's commandments are meant for our freedom, not for some of us to enslave others.

Our message of unflinching, radical love overturns the tables. It drives out any assertion that God hates anyone or anything God has made. I'm not saying that sin doesn't matter. I'm not saying that we don't all fall short or that, when we do, we do not need to repent. What I am saying is that God loves us despite our sin. God isn't sitting around waiting for you to fall so God can

smite you. God is there waiting for you to fall so God can pick you up, dust you off, and show you a different way. I am saying that our calling is to love one another in and through our shortcomings, not to lord our self-proclaimed holiness over our siblings. Just as God isn't sitting around waiting for an excuse to do some smiting, we shouldn't be either.

Let's not be like the religious folk in the Temple. Let's turn over some tables and drive out harmful messages with a whip. Let's reflect on the ways in which we – each of us – fall short of the goodness and freedom God designed for us – often by taking freedom from our neighbors. Let's repent of past wrongs and actively engage in seeking a path of reconciliation and love. Let's proclaim to the world that God's house is a house where all people are welcome, included, and loved. Let's proclaim to the world that God's house is a house of freedom and love for all people and that all means all.

Amen.