

Jesus Goes to Church, a sermon in response to Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, and John 2:13-22, by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, March 3, 2024 (B Lent 3).

Last week, we made an important stop on our Lenten Journey. Jesus reminded us – at Peter’s expense – that we “must set our minds on divine things, not on human things.” And, we learned that to follow Jesus is to live in the absurd... where we can’t rely on things that make *sense* to us. – We don’t follow Jesus with our eyes and ears, and our logic; – we can’t rely on them to lead us to truth. Sarai and Abram, for example, had clung to God’s absurd promise that they would be ancestors of a great nation, even as they grew older and older... And Jesus taught us the topsy-turvy lesson that “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it.” +++ In Christ, we become wise when we *let go* of the wisdom of this world. – We become wise when we accept that our logic – our reason – does not lead us to God.

Today... Paul reinforces that lesson. He is frustrated with the church in Corinth. Just *before* today’s reading, we read that they have been breaking into factions. Everyone is choosing up sides – each following the leader they happen to agree with the most, – and losing sight of the one thing that binds them all together. “It has been reported to me...” Paul writes, “that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephus,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was *Paul* crucified for you?” +++ **The Good News is never about the messenger – it’s never about Paul nor Apollos nor Cephus. It’s always about Jesus Christ!** – It’s about the cross... +++ And it’s not going to make sense if we try to rationalize it on our own terms. The Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, Paul writes – but **WE** put all that aside... and proclaim... Christ crucified. +++ And, yes, it does sound like nothing but foolishness *to those who are perishing* – but to *us who are being saved* – it is the *power of God*. +++ +++ But when people of the church spend more time focused on which faction we belong to, – on who we agree with (and *disagree* with), – on which group we support, – whom we’re supposed to embrace and whom we’re supposed to condemn..., – – when we focus on all of that instead of remembering cherishing Christ’s gift of salvation..., ... *we begin to pull the Church apart at the seams*. +++ +++ That’s what’s happening at Corinth.

And, I think we see the truth of what Paul is telling us in the world we find ourselves in right now, don’t we?... How often do Christians set aside our core value of unconditional love for cultural or political expediency? Clear lines are drawn between *our* factions; – +++ sliced and diced into denominations, we often focus more on our differences than what ties us together... +++ Certainly, our political parties and national dialogue actively encourage us dig trenches of separation deeper and deeper until we cannot interact productively at all anymore. We each think we know best – +++ if only they would listen +++ and we do so with such a sense of righteousness. +++ >>> ‘I belong to Paul,’ ‘I belong to Apollos,’ +++ “I belong to *this* party...” ... “I am on *that* side of whatever issue we are arguing about at the moment.” +++ We’re all lined up in our factions, ready to go nose-to-nose against each other... loaded for bear ... +++ Now don’t get me wrong - YES – we should be involved in helping shape our world through political engagement... we should work on social and cultural change... But when we allow it to divide us as citizens – divide us from family members – and especially divide us as People of God – it chips away at how we receive the perfection of Christ in our midst. +++ I mean, the savior of the world has come among us – and we are often so wrapped up in our own thing – so distracted by our factions – that we keep right on doing what we’ve been doing all along. +++ +++ **Paul... sees... that**. He sees the Church tearing itself apart – corrupting the purity of the gospel. ... +++ ... In effect, with this tough letter, Paul is running through the church with a whip of his own, knocking over their tables – breaking down their silos – and telling them there is no place for such arguing and disunity in the Church of Jesus Christ. To fully participate in the kingdom of God, we must be able to set aside our differences, and proclaim together, **“Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”**

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Today, Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians helps clear our vision so we can look at the gospel with clear eyes. ... Before digging into John’s version of Jesus cleansing the temple, I think it’s helpful to take a look towards the end of the reading, when the Jews ask Jesus to show a sign for why he is doing this – something they *don’t* do in

the synoptic versions (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). (Remember, Paul said “**the Jews demand signs.**”) And here in John, they want Jesus to explain what he’s doing. But his answer only makes them more confused: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ... That’s the sign he gives them... And, of course, they take him literally, so they respond, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ... We know, of course, “he was speaking of the temple of his body,” which would later be destroyed and rise after three days. +++ But there’s even more than that to see here. +++ Let’s take a moment to look a little closer at the writing – the choice of words – to see if that sheds some light on what’s happening. ... “**Destroy** this temple,... and in three days I will **raise it up**” ... First of all, the word translated as “destroy” – it’s the verb lúo – in the *imperative* form. That means, Jesus is not saying, “If you destroy the temple, then I’ll build it back up...” +++ No, - it’s imperative – Jesus is telling them to destroy: “You want to see a sign – OK, I’ll show you a sign... **Destroy this temple** and in three days I will raise it up.”... +++ Next – we need to look at the second half of the sentence. That’s where we have the sign that Jesus is promising: “I will **raise it up.**” +++ The verb Jesus uses here for “raise up” is egeiro. That’s not a word you’d usually use for “raising up” a building – that word is oikodomiō – “to build.” The word Jesus uses means *awakening, rousing from sleep, or arising*. So, maybe a better translation would be, “**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will wake it up.**” +++ We miss that ambiguity in English, but it would not be lost on John’s first readers, decades after Jesus’ resurrection. It’s clear that Christ is not talking about the physical structure of a temple. Here, in chapter 2, the opening section of the gospel, he’s telling the Jews exactly what’s going to happen – his own crucifixion and resurrection after 3 days. He’s telling them what they and the Romans will do: “Destroy this temple;” and what he will do: “Wake it up.” +++ So – there is a lot happening here. God is doing something new, and everyone in the Temple is missing it because they are so wrapped up in their old traditions – their old way of thinking. – They think they understand how things are. – They think they know how things will always be. But they are wrong.

+++ With the arrival of Jesus, there’s no longer a place for selling animals and changing money in the temple. There is no need for any more animal sacrifices. Now, The Messiah is the sacrificial lamb.... +++ John the Baptist already said so in chapter 1, when he points at Jesus and says to his own disciples: “Look, here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” +++ The Son of God – the Logos – the Word of God incarnate – the Messiah – the savior of the world – the Lamb of God – has ARRIVED. He is here among you. And his grace is the only thing you will ever need again. – SO, get those cows..., and sheep..., and doves..., and tables..., and money – OUT OF MY FATHER’S HOUSE.

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The Jews in the Temple that day are like the Corinthians that Paul is so frustrated with. They’re too wrapped up in our own stuff – doing what makes sense to them based on their own human wisdom, their own opinions, their own fears and limitations... – They’re too wrapped up in all of that stuff to look up and see their Messiah standing right there in front of them. +++ >>> My friends, this is a lesson we still need to hear today. +++ We can’t restrict Jesus to the old thinking and habits of the church – habits that just are working anymore. +++ We don’t need signs. – We shouldn’t be diverted by judging each another. And, we really don’t even need to agree with each other on every point. +++ ||| +++ We just need to proclaim “Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

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Christ came down to the temple that day to give God’s People a sign of things to come. – He came to reject their *status quo* – ... to chase away... their ... old..., factional..., worldly way of doing things. – And he was willing to do so with a whip if necessary. +++ Jesus came to offer a new way forward. +++ So, here in the 3rd week of Lent, confronted by Jesus and his whip of cords, it’s a time for us to ask ourselves this question: Where would he swing it if he showed up in the Church today? ... +++ ||| +++ What trading tables are erected in his name – buying and selling Christian virtue and judgment like so many sheep and doves in the temple? What kind of money changers are we, collectively squandering the Church’s reputation and moral authority for the sake of political expediency? +++ Is his Church what Jesus would have it be? +++ Are God’s People known best outside these walls for judgment and exclusion because Jesus Christ commands it? Do our Holy Scriptures ... require... us to limit who should... and should not... be invited and affirmed among us..., or decree who should and should not be invited

to his holy meal? We read the 10 Commandments a few moments ago... do they **command** us to **conflate** the... **finite**... ideals of nationalism... and power... ||| with the **eternal** mission... of Jesus Christ? +++ Like the Church in Corinth, the... Church of Today... is rife with **transactional thinking** that proclaims to the world **our own priorities**..., our own **biases**..., our own **wisdom** – more than it proclaims **Christ crucified**. +++ +++ My siblings in Christ, I fear that Jesus’ whip would come down upon these, our collective moral equivocations. – It would strike at our insistence on remaining comfortably lukewarm at a time when humanity desperately needs **a white-hot Gospel!** +++ His whip would fall..., and among our scattered tables..., and coins..., and doves... as we find ourselves driven from the doors... we’d hear his shout: **“Take those things out of my Father’s house!”**

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Yes, +++ **I know** +++ those **particular** shortcomings I mention – (a few of the many faults of today’s Christendom); – I know they don’t describe every Christian – or every church. I know there’s every likelihood that you, yourself, don’t do or believe those particular things. +++ **For that I praise the Lord!** +++ **But**, I do believe it is what Jesus finds when he **Goes to Church** today in our nation and our world. And that **we all** contribute to the division... – when we stake out our **positions**... – when we close our **ears** and **open** our mouths. And **we all** share a responsibility to be part of the Church’s reconciliation with the world.

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My friends, Lent is a time for us to look deep within. It’s a time to challenge ourselves. It’s a time to get back on track. +++ +++ Take some time to let go – **at least for a while** – let go **of anything** you think you **know** – anything you think you should be doing because you’ve **always** done it – anything that might be driving a wedge between you and **anyone** else... – or between yourself and Jesus Christ... Find it... Question it... Challenge yourself with it... Repent of it... Then give it to God in prayer. +++ +++ I think our **first** reading of the day is also a good place to **finish**. As we try our best to set aside our worldly wisdom – our selfish motives – let’s remember the 10 Commandments – which give us a framework for our inward Lenten journey. +++ They begin, as always, with God: have no other gods before me, do not make or worship idols, do not misuse the name of God. +++ Next: ensure your own self-care and communion with God by keeping a holy Sabbath. +++ **Only then** are you ready to truly love and care for other people in your community. +++ +++ When you keep this simple pattern in your life – mindful of the grace of Christ in every moment – you are ready to embrace the topsy-turvy..., self-sacrificing..., +++ **foolish**... +++ **wisdom** of the cross. +++ So, look up... pay attention... How is the crucified and risen Lamb of God at work in **your** life – **this moment??**

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