

“Faith of Fools”
3rd Sunday of Lent (B)
John 2.13-22

Pastor Kelly K. Faulstich
Grace Lutheran Church
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On this Third Sunday of Lent, our gospel text presents us with a challenging account of Jesus’ ministry. It’s the kind of story that would get its more-than-fair share of press in today’s news. The headlines might read: “Young rabbi lashes out in worship,” or “Severe whipping shuts down the market,” or “Threat made against long-constructed temple.”

This morning’s picture of Jesus isn’t one with children or sheep gathered at the hem of his robe. There are no hemorrhaging women or men born blind chasing him down to be healed. When Jesus enters the temple, he doesn’t like what he sees.

It is Passover, the author of John’s gospel tells us, and so Jerusalem would have been filled with people, thousands upon thousands of pilgrims who have come for the sacred festival. It was a perfect opportunity for some tourist dollars to be made.

Even inside the temple, everything the pilgrims would have needed to worship in the traditional manner would have involved an exchange of money. The first exchange would have involved changing their money into temple currency. It would be as if our offerings would all have to be converted into “Gracedollars” or “Gracemarks.”

And then there were all the elements required for sacrifice. John’s gospel mentions the sheep and the cattle and the doves. Yes, Passover would have been a good time to be in the sacrificial-animal business. In order to do the things one would do in worship, a purchase would be required. It would be as if each of us had to buy our worship bulletins and hymnals and maybe little portions of wine and bread.

When Jesus arrives at the temple and finds this marketplace, this Passover mini-mall, he is enraged. Only in John’s account does he fashion a whip, but, in all of the gospels, he speaks to those gathered and disrupted: “Take these things out of here!” we hear Jesus say, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”

Far beyond bake sales and bingo games, Jesus is angry that the place of worship has become a place of commerce. You couldn’t worship if you didn’t have the funds. The focus was no longer on God who brought God’s people out of Egypt.

It’s easy to see how Jesus would be angered with such business in the temple. Selling sheep or bulletins, doves or bread just doesn’t seem right, especially to any 10 Commandment following folk like hopefully we try to be.

Have no other gods. The number one commandment is pretty clear. And while our gods might not take the form of statue or idol or cattle stall, we too have our fair share of things we put before and prioritize above God.

The Confirmation curriculum that we currently use here at Grace, “Here We Stand,” reframes each one of the commandments into a big idea for our youth to remember. The first commandment, “Have no other

gods,” is massaged into “God wants to be everything to us.” Everything, not just a part of our lives, but everything. The skit that goes along with this Confirmation lesson is about a group of young people, worshipping their video games and their good grades and their fancy hats. In it, we learn, hopefully, that God is bigger than all those things, and that we should worship God alone.

Our lives can find us seeking all sorts of gods in place of our Creator. We flock to the mall or to restaurants or to lectures or sporting events in search of fulfillment. Not that these activities are all bad in and of themselves. But when they come before or in place of God, we should be concerned. In Luther’s explanation of the first commandment, we read, “ We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.”

“All things?” we might ask. But what about knowledge? What about wisdom or experience or elaborate signs? What about degrees and accomplishments and awards?

After the whipping and reproaching, Jesus responds to the Jews’ request for a sign. When Jesus declares that he will rebuild the temple in three days if it is destroyed, Jesus is proclaiming a radical message. He will not save through military conquest or academic endeavor. Jesus’ saving and the rebuilding of the temple as his body will come through death on the cross.

For us, two-thousand-some years later, this doesn’t come as a surprise. We’ve been through this journey of Lent to Good Friday before. We’ve turned a violent means of death into gold jewelry and wood carvings. The oh-so-angry Jesus we meet up with in the gospel will so humbly head to Calvary.

Although the temple-folk and even his own disciples do not understand it at the time, Jesus is foretelling his death and resurrection here. In First Corinthians, Paul speaks to the means of Jesus’ death and the good news it bears.

To those of us being saved by the power of the cross, it is good news. What the world sees as foolish, Paul writes, God uses. To what the world sees as weak, God brings strength.

Although humankind has been created in God’s image. We are not God. Our ways are vain and our attempts are feeble when we try to control or explain all that happens or doesn’t happen. I think part of the challenge or discomfort we experience upon encountering texts that include more law than good news comes from our very humanity.

God is bigger than we are. God is older, and God is wiser than we can ever aspire to be. And still, God wants to be everything to us.

Jesus who died on the cross and rose again gathered around him fishermen and women and tax collectors and all sorts of folks that would have had little to no power or perceived wisdom. In baptism, little babies and children and adults are named as children of God, who with great knowledge and might, names even the most inexperienced and powerless as God’s children.

In the temple, he responded to the distortion of worship and the failure of his contemporaries to acknowledge God as God alone. And on the cross, Jesus died for the sins of the world. Jesus died and was risen so that even the most foolish in the world’s judgment might know God’s grace and God’s glory.

To the glory of God. Amen.