

A Sermon Delivered by
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Glenside, Pennsylvania

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Jesus drove all of them out of the temple.... He also poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. Take these things out of here (he said)... Stop making my Father's house a marketplace. (John 2:13-22)

Today is the Third Sunday of Lent, and we are well into the Lenten season. I said in a sermon at the beginning of Lent that one of the problems this time of the church year is that there is very little Good News to proclaim. We see that especially in the Gospel lesson where Jesus is angered to the point where he apparently destroys the economic stability of the temple. Many critics of Jesus and his tactics have pointed to this event as one that they say diminishes Jesus' stature and character, and they accuse him of wanton violence and recklessness. While it's true Jesus is extremely angry, perhaps even excessively so, his violence is targeted against things, not people. It's against chairs and tables and containers and moneyboxes, and he admittedly upends and smashes them with abandon. Clearly, this is not the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, that was portrayed to us in Sunday School; it is instead a human being outraged with the perversion of the religious enterprise that he presumably thought had been sanctified in the temple and established to honor God. To Jesus' moral indignation, the temple had become engaged in questionable practices and corrupt economic activities; and in the face of this, his emotions got the better of him. Take a close look though – this is a compassionate human being, a human Jesus, who gets mad as hell; just as you or I might get mad at today's bankers and investment tycoons with their outrageous bonuses, benefits, and golden parachutes. Remember, this is a Jesus who cares deeply for the cause of righteousness, justice and mercy; and we need to keep his bad temper and on-the-edge-of-it behavior in context.

The problem here is that this is hardly Good News in the conventional sense, and it is interesting that this unvarnished narrative comes to us right from the Gospel itself, the Gospel of John; it comes right out of the Bible which in

many places, and this may be one of them, if you take it at face value, can be a very revolutionary document.

So we have to say right up front that Lent has never been the best time for contemplative and soothing passages to be read from scripture; nor is it the most fitting occasion for untroubled reflection and self-examination. Instead what we encounter are sobering references to reality and tough love. Sometimes the truth hurts. And if we fast-forward to the present, we see evidence of the same thing happening today in the wider religious community: a community which is changing rapidly.

Just this week for example, some sobering news was delivered and underscored with the reporting done on a national survey of religious attitudes, beliefs and behaviors documented in what is called the ARIS study. A-R-I-S stands for American Religious Identification Survey, and it seems to be a blockbuster of a report – or at least it's being presented as such.

CNN headlined a news flash that “America is becoming less Christian, survey finds” and USA Today on its front page boldly stated: “Almost all denominations losing ground, survey finds.” And again in a subheading it declared: “Faith is shifting, drifting or vanishing outright.” Well, that certainly got my attention.....

Here are some of the highlights:

-America is a less Christian nation than it was 20 years ago.

-Christianity is not simply losing-out to other religions, but to a rejection of religion altogether.

-3 out of 4 Americans (75%) call themselves Christian today, while in 1990 almost 9 out of 10 (86%) did.

-The percentages of those who belong to “mainline” (or what some have called “old line”) congregations, such as Episcopal and Lutheran churches, have fallen dramatically.

-The rise of fervent in-your-face Christianity, has turned people off, and is purportedly contributing to the rejection of religion altogether.

-1 in 5 Americans now have no religious affiliation or identity at all. None. In fact the “None’s” are the fastest growing non-religious group, so to speak, in America.

OK, so what’s going on here? A closer look at these so-called “None’s” may be illustrative because they now represent 15% of our population, and they’re growing rapidly. The study showed these aren’t people who may have previously followed a good-hearted, civic-minded, civil religion, they are individuals who are not thinking about religion at all, and in fact are overtly rejecting it – happily so.

In terms of their behaviors, it is interesting to note that of all the “None’s” identified; 40% say they had no childhood religious initiation ceremony such as a baptism, christening, circumcision, bar mitzvah or naming ceremony. 55% of those married had no religious ceremony or wedding. 66% say they have no expectation of a religious funeral, and have actually taken active steps to prevent that from happening. As one person commented;

“Your parents may decide for you on baptism, and your spouse has a say in your wedding, but when people talk about dying, they speak for themselves.”

Consider the following couple who typify the “None’s.” Diane and Stefan Mueller of Austin, Texas, left behind their childhood religions when they met each other in college, and had no clergy present at their wedding in Hawaii. When they had a baby two years ago, they said;

“we discussed baptism, but we would only have it done for his mother and my father, so we decided, - NO.”

Clearly something is happening in a changing America. One analyst said the earlier 1990 survey data showed then that many saw God as a “personal hobby” and that the United States was a “greenhouse for spiritual sprouts.” Now almost 20 years later religion has become more like a “fashion statement,” not a deep personal commitment for a substantial and growing number of people.

And even Episcopal clergy are weighing in on the findings. The Rev. Kendal Harmon, Canon Theologian for the Diocese of South Carolina has blamed

social mobility for the problem. He said recently:

“Mobility means your ideas are more challenged and your family and childhood traditions have less influence, particularly if you are not strongly rooted in them. I see kids today who have no vocabulary of faith, and frankly, neither do many of their parents.”

He then recalled an incident to illustrate the point.

“A couple came into my office once with a yellow pad of their teenage son’s questions. One of them was:” What is that guy doing hanging up there on the plus sign?”

That pretty much says it all...

So it seems we may have come full circle with the bad news about the religious enterprise, and it takes us right back to Jesus and his outburst in the temple. Can religion get so out of touch with people’s lives, that it becomes something unworthy of respect, needing to be rejected or overturned, as in the temple? That may in fact be the contemporary challenge for those of us formally engaged in the highly organized institutional life of the church today.

In light of that, I would like to close by making a plea for the church’s survival and vitality. In the Anglican way of thinking we jokingly refer to the three-legged stool as the cornerstone of our faith. The three legs are Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. And when we define what we mean by tradition, we inevitably make reference to the apostolic succession of our line of bishops all the way back to Jesus, the disciples, and to St. Peter himself, who presumably was the “rock” Jesus chose on which to build his church.

There is something undeniably resilient and renewing in that long, long, link that ties us to the past, and grounds us uniquely in our identity as Christians. In the final analysis though, Jesus says to each of us what he said to his disciples, “Follow me.” If you wish to save your life, forget it. But if you really want to find your life, even to the point of denying yourself, then come and ‘follow me.’ For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world if they must forfeit their life to do so? Indeed, what can the world give

you in return for the everlasting value of your life? And here's the interesting thing. That same offer is extended to each and every one of us today. Whether in good faith or bad faith we are still called to struggle with that bidding, 'follow me' ...or reject it.

Let me conclude then by using the well-known prayer of the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, which I think neatly combines the humanity and compassion, even the outrage and anger of Jesus; along with the skeptical and scoffing nature of so many of today's disbelievers; together with the meager albeit well-intentioned efforts of ordinary people like you and me simply trying to get along and get by. Merton prays...

My Lord God,

*I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really understand myself;
and the fact that I think I am following
your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the
right road, though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always though I may
seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and
you will never leave me to face my troubles alone.*

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

CREDITS:

Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA Today, March 9, 2009
CNN Headline News, March 9, 2009
Thomas Merton, selected writings