

Third Sunday of Lent "B" – Chapter 9

The third Sunday of Lent in year "B" has for its Gospel the cleansing of the temple from the Gospel of John. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) position the cleansing of the temple immediately before Holy Week. John places Jesus' zealous action at a different time. John has Jesus cleansing the temple at the beginning of his ministry because, theologically, he was saying that Jesus was the new temple that would replace the old system of sacrifice. Since the cleansing appears later in the Synoptics, just before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, they are telling us his provocative act was one of the major factors leading to his trial and death.

In any event, Jesus' violent action speaks for itself. The temple was the center of Jewish religion and culture. In the temple, sacrifices were offered and many prayers ascended to God. The western, or wailing wall, of Herod's temple from the time of Jesus still remains. Even today prayers of petition are written and inserted in the cracks between the large limestone blocks. People from all over the world – Jews, Christians, and people of every faith – gather to "wail" the temple's demise and make intercession.

Prayer is one of the three main pillars (the other two are fasting and almsgiving) of Lent. Prayer is more than speaking. Prayer is also listening. Vatican II in its Constitution on the Word of God tells us: "We speak to God when we pray; we hear God when we read the divine saying." (Dei Verbum #25). In other words, prayer is both speaking and listening. The Bible is the blueprint for a meaningful Lent. During Lent, we make time to listen to the Word of God.

If you have ever spent time trying to hear, or, spend time in silent contemplative prayer, you know that your one main enemy in trying to concentrate is noise and distractions. Noise disturbs concentration and disrupts a peaceful atmosphere. For example, noise is a baby crying while you are trying to pray or a cell phone ringing. Noise is anything and everything that distracts. Leaf blowers, car alarms, traffic sounds, airplanes, and helicopters all frustrate focus and make listening difficult.

Regarding the chaotic atmosphere Jesus found in the temple, a quote by D. A. Carson probably sums it up best: "Instead of solemn dignity and the murmur of prayer, there is the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Instead of brokenness and contrition, holy adoration and prolonged petition, there is noisy, commerce." The temple, which was a "house of prayer for all peoples," had turned into a place of commerce, a den of thieves. The good people who traveled there from all over Israel for Passover were being deprived of its primary purpose: contact with God.

Jesus was more than provoked. The normally meek and gentle Jesus who would not "bruise a broken reed or quench a smoldering wick" (Matthew 12:20) was in a fury. Jesus was made livid by two main things: religious hypocrisy and the pollution of worship. In a rare expression of frenzy outrage, Jesus made a whip of cords and went about upsetting the tables of the money changers and creating chaos. Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation *Christ Lives* (paragraph #143), advised young people to "create a ruckus" in the world because of their faith in Jesus Christ. As Christians we need to speak up about injustice, abortion, human rights, and inequality.

We are followers of the one who made a ruckus in his day. The apostles "turned the world upside down." (Acts 17:6). What about us? What fires us up? We are made for more than mediocrity. We are made for passion. During Lent and beyond, think: Is there a cause I can devote myself to? Be enthusiastic and devote yourself to causes that make a difference. Try to live your life with passion.

Besides speaking, one of the primary modes of prayer is listening. St. Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, said: "Listen with the ears of your heart." Our heart has ears if we can get quiet enough and tune in. In the first reading from Exodus, we hear about the commandments that guide us in our moral activities. God offers us wisdom for living if we will but listen. The second reading from first Corinthians shares with us the source of true wisdom. Jesus and him crucified. Jesus is the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). There is a wisdom that flows from the cross that forgives and saves us.

These Scripture readings come to us in the third week of Lent. The initial fervor and newness of Lent has ended. Now it is time to roll up our sleeves and get involved in the heart of Lent; prayer. Remember, a major goal of Lent is enlightenment and prayer is the vehicle that takes us there. Romans 12:12 tells us to persevere in prayer. It is easy to get discouraged when we do not sense the consolation of God's presence or the answers to your petitions. When Jesus taught about prayer, he told us to keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking. He taught several parables about being persistent in prayer and not giving up. Jesus knew how hard prayer can be and wanted to encourage us.

People generally complicate prayer. Prayer is simply conscious contact with God. In prayer we are attempting to communicate with God. Prayer is overtly relational. We want to grow in our intimacy with God. Enlightenment is the main goal of Lent. Illumination comes in silence and through reading the Scriptures. Silence is golden. As we already know, prayer is also about speaking.

Friendship

We are told that the Lord spoke to Moses face-to-face as to a friend. Abraham was a friend of God. Jesus said: "I no longer call you slaves, but friends." (John 15:15). St. Catherine of Siena found God friendly and had her intimate dialogues with God. In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius of Loyola encourages us to speak to God "as one friend speaks to another."

In prayer, we should also advocate listening. We all love to talk. When we speak, do it in the contents of friendship. Friendship implies a past history and a degree of knowing each other. We have a history with God. There is mutual affection and caring. We can share our deepest darkest secrets with our friend and sense that we will not be judged harshly because of it. As we open up to God, intimacy increases and affection grows. Love is being with your close friend. You can be who you truly are and you do not have to put on airs or try to impress him. Be yourself with God.

There is also mutual sharing in a friendship. It is not just all about you expressing your thoughts and feelings. Friendship is about mutuality and give-and-take. Through sharing, there is a tremendous bond and communion that can be achieved. Sharing and mutuality deepen intimacy.

Friends are revelatory. Growth in intimacy happens over time as hidden things are brought out into the open. In a prayer relationship with Jesus, hide nothing. Let him know your deepest secrets. God is in touch with what is within you. Tell him your feelings and sins. In a mutual exchange, he will reveal secrets to you. Once when Jesus was praying, he praised God for "hiding his presence from the wise and the learned and revealing himself to the childlike." (Matthew 11:25). Even heavenly wisdom may be shared: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit." (1 Corinthians 2:9–10). Friends share secrets with each other.

Some who are married talk about having found their "soul mate." That is the person with whom they can completely be themselves with and trust. A deep bond occurs, like two pieces of a puzzle fitting perfectly together. Intimacy grows as you share your dreams as well as your scars with each other.

The context of our prayer is that we are relating to another who is completely trustworthy. God is for us. We can bare our souls and still be loved and accepted. God wants to share and reveal God's self with us also.

Purification in Lent

Paul looked at the Corinthians and chided them: "Don't you know you are the temple of God and God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). Jesus was not only interested in cleansing Herod's temple. He is also interested in purifying us. Since we are the temple of God, Jesus wants to drive out the noise, distractions, and attractions in us. We so easily settle into too much television, Internet, and iPhonitis. Many get up in the morning, grab their iPhone to see what emails or text they have. Once that starts, viewing the iPhone leads to more time spent on it. Create a new habit and seek God first and foremost. We can be addicted and slaves to bad habits as well as habitual sin. The grace of Lent means Jesus is at work in us and cleansing us.

"I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and idols. I will give you a new heart." (Ezekiel 36:25). We need a "natural heart instead of our stony hearts of flesh. This verse from the prophet Ezekiel capsulizes what Lent is all about: interior change and purification.

We live in a noisy, cluttered world. Jesus prioritized his relationship with God by retreating to the desert. During his ministry, he often rose before dawn and prayed. Other times he spent all night in prayer to God. He knew the vital necessity of connecting with God in prayer. Prayer is our lifeblood as Christians also.

Lent is a great time for a housecleaning. Do not be afraid of quiet silence in the language of love. Read the Scriptures and other spiritual books. Pray in the context of friendship. Pour out your heart to God. Open yourself up for a cleansing. God will revealed truths to you that will change your life.

Lenten Lessons:

- Prayer is conscious contact with God
- Listen with the ears of your heart
- Share in the context of friendship
- Like Jesus, be consumed by zeal and live with passion

Lenten Actions:

- Spend three minutes in complete silence every day
- Pick a cause and raise a ruckus

