

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2018

"DO YOU GET IT?"
by Mary Anne Biggs

1 Corinthians 1:22-27 ~ John 2:13-22

Do you want to know one of the biggest differences between Texas and Wisconsin? You people are much cleaner ... and you are much harder workers. And for the most part, you do all that hard work yourself. I hate to admit it, but in Texas we hire it done if we can afford to ... and over-look it if we can't. I'll never forget the first time John went into a Culvers Restaurant. He came out of the men's room with a dumbfounded look on his face. When I asked him about it he said, "They are washing the walls ... they are washing the walls." And I remember the first pastoral call I made in Nekoosa ... to a lovely woman in her 90's ... who lived out in the country. When I finally found her house (you know my sense of direction is acutely challenged) I got out of the car to ring her door bell. All of a sudden, I heard, "Up here!" My eyes scanned the skies, and there she was ... re-roofing her house!

And don't get me started on spring cleaning ... here that means moving all the furniture, cleaning all the closets, dusting off the ceiling fans, washing all the walls and the curtains. On the first warm weather day half of Eagle River is out trimming all the trees, pulling up the weeds, and planting new flowers in the hope that we have seen the last frost. Don't get me wrong, I do most of this too ... perhaps not with the same vigor ... but I am a fan of spring cleaning. We all need it.

Lent is a kind of spring cleaning of the soul. And of the church. We look more closely at ourselves. We notice the weeds in our gardens. It's a time to get rid of some rubbish, clean out our closets, make more living room for the Spirit. And we need a regular cleansing of the Temple, too. I don't just mean a work day to get our buildings and grounds repaired. I mean, letting go of the little irritations that might have arisen between us ... freeing ourselves of institutional worries to refocus on spiritual concerns ... putting the love of Christ and the love of people back at the center again. Every once in a while, we need to dig up the soil and plant new flowers.

In our gospel story today, you might say Jesus does a Spring cleaning of the Temple. Jesus walks into the Temple and sees bankers exchanging international currency, filthy livestock pens, and kids selling incense ... and he gets incensed about it. He makes a whip out of cords, turns over some tables sending shekels everywhere, and stampedes the animals out of the gate.

It's a confusing story, because surely Jesus had seen them before on previous visits since the time he was twelve. Besides the trade was necessary for the proper functioning of the Temple. People had to pay their Temple tax in Jewish coins. Foreign coins had gravened images on them. And you couldn't bring your best goat all the way from Ur of the Chaldees and still have it in

good shape for sacrifice. You had to buy local. With all that ritual slaughter the place must have smelled horribly, and the people were probably glad God had commanded incense, too. The smoke represented the prayers of the people rising to God, but they provided a relieving whiff on the way, as well. It made good business sense for the priests to bring the market inside the temple walls. There they could control it. There they could protect the people from price gouging and fraud. And why shouldn't the Temple make the profits from Temple business?

Then Jesus did a dangerous thing. He upset more than a few tables. The Jews were extremely sensitive about their Temple. A few hundred years before Antiochus Epiphanes had marched his filthy Gentile army into the Temple, robbed its treasury, and sacrificed a pig on the altar. The Jews had gone to war. They didn't stand a chance, but by the grace of God, they won. This surprising victory made them bold, and they were fierce about protecting their Temple. Later, three hundred of them had gathered in the amphitheater at Caesarea on the Sea, where Pontius Pilate kept his headquarters. They wanted the eagle on top of the Roman standard prohibited from the Temple area. It was idolatrous, a graven image. Pilate figured he wasn't going to be pushed around by a bunch of unruly religious fanatics. He surrounded the amphitheater with Roman soldiers, spears raised, swords drawn. He figured these Jews would prefer a few eagles to the taste of cold steel. But one by one the Jews bared their necks and said, go right ahead and kill us. We would rather die than see our Temple profaned. Pilate had to back down and give them what they wanted.

So, when Jesus the carpenter from Galilee, upset the tables and drove out the animals, the temple guardians reacted quickly. "What sign can you show for doing this?" they demanded. Show us your papers. Show us your authority. Show us your power, because God has put us in charge here. Jesus answered, "Tear down this Temple and I will rebuild it in three days." They didn't get it. These brightest and best teachers of Israel weren't so different from the common rabble or Jesus' own closest disciples. They never seemed to get it, either. How many of us do? When Jesus said, "Tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in three days," they naturally thought he was talking about the building, which had taken them forty-six years to renovate, and they still weren't finished. At that, they drove Jesus out of the Temple, and now they were dead set to get him. You could get away with disputing with the rabbis. Everybody did that. But you didn't make threats against the Temple.

Of course, Jesus wasn't talking about the stones and mortar. He was talking about his own body. He was talking about the incarnation of God in his human flesh. He was talking about the Temple of the body in whom God dwells. Later Paul would suggest that the real holy of holies where we meet God is not some edifice, however magnificent ... but our own souls ... and the souls around us. That's where we meet God. Not in some building. Even so, many Christians ... even we ourselves ... have this tendency to treat buildings better than we treat the people around us. I think that's why Jesus was offended by the Temple trade. Maybe he felt they were cheating people ... or maybe he was offended by the very idea of making commerce necessary for people to get to God. But I think he was mainly offended by their misunderstanding of where we meet God in the first place.

"Tear down this Temple and I will rebuild it in three days." This was his power. Later they realized Jesus was talking about his own death and resurrection. But they didn't get it at the

moment. The Temple leaders certainly didn't get it ... and this remark more than any other crystallized their opposition to Jesus. If someone threatened to damage our holy place, I'd call the police in a heartbeat. And that's what the Temple leaders eventually did. They called in the Romans. And they crucified him when, once again, Pilate had to back down and give them what they wanted.

The cross was a disaster to the disciples, and a confusion even after the resurrection. Who would believe in such a Messiah? It was a joke in the ancient world ... these people who followed a crucified God. I mean, what would you think of a cult following some traitor who had died before a firing squad after a government trial? But these Christians went so far as to make the cross the symbol of their faith. They were a marginalized folk ... not the people who were running things ... and you could hardly find a better symbol of powerlessness and vulnerability ... of marginalization and weakness than the cross.

Paul admits as much. *"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"* (1 Cor. 1:18). Foolishness! The Greek word is *moros* from which we get the word "moron." That's what the world called Christians in the first century. Morons! What a bunch of morons to claim God became a common carpenter. What a bunch of morons to emulate a convicted criminal who had been executed. What a bunch of morons to believe he rose from the dead and lives inside each of them. And especially this ... what a bunch of morons to follow his way of self-sacrifice and non-violence and love. The world still thinks that of us Christians, that is, when we actually follow the way of the cross ... instead of masquerading as Christians while following the way of the world.

Elsewhere Paul calls the cross a "scandal" (Gal 5:11). But we are no longer scandalized by the cross. In the first place, crucifixion is no longer used as a means of execution so we have forgotten it as a brutal form of capital punishment. We are more civilized, so to speak. Then in the fourth century Constantine turned the meaning of the cross on its head when he placed it on the standards of his Roman legions ... marched them through the river to baptize them ... and announced "by this (sign) conquer." Centuries of use as a religious symbol in silver around our necks, in gold upon our altars, polished steel on our steeples, and marble on our tombstones has numbed us to its offense. Like Constantine, many modern Christians have made the cross a symbol of imperial conquering power, taking the world by force in Jesus' name. But that is exactly what the cross is not!

The cross is not a symbol of Divine violence in the scripture. It contradicts the way the world works. It is the symbol of Divine love ... the power which overcomes evil by refusing to become evil ... the power which responds to violence by turning the other cheek ... the power which absorbs violence and loves the persecutor ... the power of forgiveness, renunciation, self-sacrifice, and service. The world of Jesus' time ... like the world in our own time ... had a different understanding of power. Generally, power meant the one with the biggest army wins. The one with the best arms, the one with the smartest generals, the one with the most brutal soldiers, rules. And if you can't beat `em, you better join `em, or you will lose everything. And most of the world, including the Jews, including a lot of Christians since, believed in gods who triumph by overwhelming force. But Jesus is a God who submits to a cross and overcomes evil by dying an ignominious death reserved for runaway slaves and revolting rebels.

The way of the cross is the way of love, but it is the harder way. That is why those Christians who simply discard the cross ... preferring only the triumph of resurrection ... are tempted to transform the cross into a symbol of arrogant conquering power as the world understands power. "But to those of us who are being saved," says Paul, "the cross is the power of God."

In the season of Lent, the cross is the broom God uses for spring cleaning in the Temples of our churches and the Temples of our hearts. It calls us to look up, to pull out the weeds. It attacks our pride and presumption. It calls us away from pettiness and power games and back to the way of a self-giving love. It insults our intelligence, this offensive, moronic symbol, because it reminds us that all our intelligence can't keep us from blowing each other to bits ... and pushing God out of the world every chance we get. It reminds us that no matter how smart you are, how well educated, how mature and experienced, how high on the ladder of success, you are saved by a God who loves you ... just like every other moron on the planet.

A former member of the church in Nekoosa told me she hated the cross we hung in the chancel every year during Lent. She thought it was ugly. It offended her. Well, it's supposed to offend us. It's supposed to remind us what the best of human law and human religion did to Jesus and still does to God's beloved people in the world. It's supposed to challenge our misplaced priorities and masked idolatries and show us we aren't nearly as smart or righteous or holy as we think. It's supposed to make us look at ourselves and stop blaming others for a change. And it's supposed to remind us that God loves us anyway, so why don't we at least try to do better. It's supposed to remind us that the real power of life lies in love and not aggression.

A classical call to worship from the Good Friday liturgy begins "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?" I invite you, in this season of Lent, not to let the cross be nothing to you, not to pass by the cross, but to pause, to let it be God's means of cleansing your heart. Look up, clean out the weeds, start over again in the right direction. Join the morons who follow the cross. Don't trust your own wits, because the cross is the power and the wisdom of God. And Christ is the true Temple where we meet God.

Let us pray?

Lord, we can be as dull witted as any who have ever encountered you. So much of the time we are slow to respond to your call and we let other distractions crowd you out of our lives like so many weeds in the flowerbed. In this season, cleanse the Temple of our hearts and revive our church by your Spirit that we might deny ourselves, and take up the cross, and follow you. Amen.