

## Lent 3 Year B 2012

Let's start with a joke and a laugh this morning. Good clean fun because it's good to laugh as often as possible.

There was once a small plane with five passengers on it. Halfway to their destination, the engines started sputtering. The pilot came out from behind the curtain, ominously wearing a parachute pack. He said, "I have some bad news and some good news and some more bad news. The bad news is we have an engine malfunction and we're going down. The good news is there are several parachutes here along the wall. The bad news is that there are 5 of you and only 4 of them. So you'll have to work it out among yourselves. I know you have many choices in air travel and so I'd like to thank you for choosing our airline and wish you a very pleasant evening – wherever your final destination may be." With that, he was out the door.

A woman leaped up. "I am one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the country. My patients depend on me." She grabbed a parachute pack and jumped.

A man stood up and said, "I'm a partner in a large law firm and the practice would fall to pieces without me." He grabbed a parachute pack and sailed out into the open sky.

Another man stood up and said, "I am purported to be the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I don't even want to mention it – it would make you feel utterly inferior. But surely you're smart enough to understand that I must have a parachute." He grabbed a pack and he was gone, too.

There were only two people left on the plane now, a middle-aged pastor and a teenage boy. "Son," said the minister, "you take the last parachute. You're young. You have your whole life ahead of you. I've had a good life, and I'll take the fall on this one. God bless you, and safe landing."

The teenager looked up at the minister. "Thanks, pastor. That means a lot to me, really. But there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my backpack." .....I guess the message is that being smart doesn't always lead to a good outcome.

This morning we hear the Gospel account of an angry Jesus. Jesus is in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover and so he goes to the place where everyone is headed, .... the temple. He finds there people selling animals to be sacrificed. He finds the money changers seated at tables exchanging Roman coins for Palestinian Shekels to be used to buy the animals to be sacrificed for their sins. The sight of this makes Jesus so angry that he makes a whip and he drives the whole bunch of them out

of the temple. He scatters the coins of the money changers all over the place and then he turns their tables over. This is the scene of an angry protest. And how often do we think of Jesus as angry? I don't think we do. Somehow anger is an attribute of God that we would rather dismiss. Maybe we think that anger is only a human emotion and that the Divine Trinity is somehow above or beyond getting mad.

The story of today's Gospel is often called the cleansing of the temple. Jesus cleans house as he throws out the people who would turn God's house into a marketplace. A place where the practice is that sins can be cast off for a price and the sacrifice of an innocent animal. There are no discussions of repentance or amendment of life just an innocent sacrifice.

What came to my mind are the stories we like to remember about Jesus and how we decorate our places of worship and our churches with these stories. I was remembering the beautiful stained glass windows we have here in our sanctuary and however unique to our church these scenes of Jesus' life are they are not uncommon. They are often chosen as the stories that get preserved in the stained glass windows of churches. Look around at the scenes of Jesus life we have adorning our sanctuary. Behind me and above us is the beautiful depiction of the Ascension of Christ. Along the side of the sanctuary are gorgeous depictions of The Nativity, The Young Christ as he is presented in the temple for the

first time, The Sermon on the Mount, The Last Supper, The Crucifixion, The Resurrection, and The Good Shepherd.

So with curiosity I goggled the cleansing of the temple in stained glass and guess what I got. One of the sites I was directed to was the First Presbyterian Church in San Anselmo, California. My old tromping grounds in the San Francisco Bay area. The subject was a sermon by The Rev. Dr. Joanne Whitt that was preached last week. She started her reflections writing that, "Someone observed once that he'd never seen a stained glass window depicting the cleansing of the temple – our gospel passage for next week, when Jesus goes into the temple and turns over the tables of the moneychangers. I'd bet if there were a way to portray this morning's story in stained glass, not one church in a thousand would want it. We prefer our Jesus with little children crawling onto his lap, maybe a sheep tucked under his arm. Not this scary Jesus."

Someone at Trinity Episcopal Church in Norfolk Virginia asks, Where did we get the idea that being a person of faith meant that we always have to be nice? It seems to me that today's scripture readings, particularly those from the gospel of John, suggest that instead of "nice" we are called to be genuine, to be real. And that in answering the call to be genuine, we may encounter difficult or extremely uncomfortable situations.

The Rt. Reverend John E. Hines was the presiding Bishop of the United States during the turbulent years between 1965 to 1974 when the country struggled over the quest for civil rights and the Vietnam War. In a sermon concerning today's gospel reading from John, Bishop Hines states the need to be real rather bluntly. "They did not crucify Jesus for saying 'Behold the lilies of the field, how they grow.' They crucified him for saying 'Consider the thieves of the temple, and how they steal.'"

Some people are shocked by Jesus' anger in this passage, which has often been called "The Cleansing of the Temple," because it's so different from our ideas of the gentle shepherd. We much prefer walking on water, or changing water into wine, or talk on the parting of the Red Sea. Give us the shepherd seeking out the lost sheep, or the prodigal coming home. Give us the feeding of five thousand from a lunch pail. But don't give us Divine fury. We want to overlook that the scriptures record a God with a full range of emotions including anger.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, in particular, the anger of God is represented more often than the anger of the people of God. This is not to suggest that God is perpetually angry. But the anger of God is expressed as part of the full "emotional life" of the Lord God. It is shown to flow from God's covenant love for Israel as God's chosen people. God's anger flows from love in the same way that anyone seeing a sick child refused at a

hospital because he or she didn't have insurance would be filled with anger over the injustice.

The Old Testament God has a full range of emotions. Historically the pagan gods that surrounded the people of Israel often acted with irrational and capricious anger.

But the anger of the Hebrew

Scripture's God is aggravated by specifics. God's anger is never without a cause. When it comes to God's anger, it burns momentarily at specific injustices, or faithlessness on the part of the people.

But God's Covenant love endures forever.

We may not like it and we may not be inclined to choose it, but maybe one of the images we should see upon entering church is this one scene remembered today. Jesus is angry and he reminds us that the scriptures portray God with a full range of emotions including anger. Often we might associate anger with a lack of love. Not true with God..... God's anger is rooted in love. Love of justice, love of equality, love of fairness, love of liberty, love of honesty, and integrity, love of mercy and humility. We would do well to embrace these things of love and sometimes, as Jesus shows us, a lack of these things of love will make us angry. Amen.

*Excerpts taken from Synthesis*