

Sunday, March 11, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Cleanse the Temple”

Sometimes you just need to clean things out.

Sometimes you have to be bold and do something big.

Sometimes incremental change and nuanced suggestions don't work.

Sometimes you have to do things that people don't expect.

For Jesus, in Jerusalem for Passover, this was one of those times.

The gentle prophet, the learned rabbi, the dutiful son needed to make a statement.

And he did.

“He made a whip of chords and drove all of them out of the temple.”

We could look at this scripture passage and interpret it as a lesson for upholding the sacred nature of worship.

We could read this story as a metaphor for keeping clutter out of our lives – preventing distractions from diminishing our relationship with God.

We could clamor about all of the things in the world that erode our faith.

However, to interpret this passage as being about worship space and ritual traditions, we would have to ignore the part where Jesus says,

“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”

If we interpret his statement as referring to the physical temple, we will be no more enlightened than the Pharisees who cited the construction history – 46 years – as a response to Jesus' protest.

No, we must understand that this story is about us.

This story is about us as temples.

This story is about you and I created in the image of God.

This story is about a covenant made between God and the people in the Exodus passage.

This story is about what you and I do every day to uphold that covenant, to live the ten commandments, to build the Kingdom of God.

One of the reasons I attempted to simplify the ten commandments for the children this morning is because it is absolutely foundational to our faith.

Perhaps you think that the ten commandments are antiquated rules that don't really apply to our complex lives today.

I would argue that returning to these ten basic rules for living could radically transform the world.

I contend that these simple instructions, followed closely, are the basis for a just society, a peaceful community and a loving family.

I want you to think of yourself as a temple, something that exists to honor God.

The care of that temple is of paramount importance.

The commandments teach us how to do that.

The commandments were not meant to restrict the people.

They were instructions to help them live in freedom - freedom from all of the oppression, idolatry and fragmentation of their lives in Egypt.

The commandments are directed to the individual.

The covenant made in Sinai is between you and God.

You are the only one who can choose whether or not you will honor that covenant.

The first four commandments called for love of God and the last six called for love of one another.

Together the commandments were ten invitations into the freedom of love.

Are you willing to accept these invitations?

First: *You shall have no other Gods before me.*

This means that God comes first in all things.

Second: You shall not make for yourself an idol.

This means that you are not to worship anything more than God – not money, youth, success, material possessions – nothing more than God –

this one is so important that God promises to hold a grudge for 3 or 4 generations if you violate it, but also promises steadfast love for those who uphold it;

Third: No swearing – that's pretty easy.

If you pay attention to your language it will ease your stress.

I often suggest to people that they refrain from listening to radio talk shows that have people yelling and instead listen to quiet music or silence. This will calm you down;

Fourth: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

This commandment is so important that God provides a full statement about who is to be included, how it came to be and why it must be obeyed.

Sabbath, rest from our labors, is important for our own success.

If you continually deplete yourself, never allowing time for relaxation or rejuvenation, you will be unable to sustain your activities.

This is not just about working – this is about doing.

To be healthy – to be a clean temple for God – you must periodically stop and do nothing.

Sabbath rest allows you time to experience holiness, Godliness, peacefulness.

Fifth: Honor your parents.

We often think this only applies to children, but God doesn't say that.

He suggests that honoring your parents is tied to long life in the promised land.

This is worth pondering.

The next four are simple outright commands –

Sixth: You shall not murder – no footnotes, no explanation, just you shall not murder.

Imagine if the entire world took that one to heart.

It doesn't say you shall not murder unless it is in your own interest, or to protect yourself, or to increase your resources, or to punish someone else's wrongdoing...

It just says you shall not murder.

Seventh: You shall not commit adultery-again, clear, no gradations.

Eighth: You shall not steal.

Nine: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. This means, no lying, ever.

Ten: You shall not covet your neighbor's house, or wife, or slave, or ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

That includes cars, tvs, land, views, retirement accounts.

So let's look at which of these commandments might have been violated by the temple bazaar that was taking place in Jerusalem:

The merchants were selling cattle, sheep and doves for sacrificial worship – that likely violated number one and two;

the moneychangers were exchanging coins for those visiting and perhaps being less than honest in their rates – that would fall under number 8;

probably some swearing going on perhaps even some lying – that takes care of 3 and 9.

So just with what we know we see 5 commandments ignored – that's without peeking behind closed doors to determine if 5, 7 or 10 should be included.

The point is Jesus was offended by this behavior in the temple.

For him, it was a direct violation of the covenant we have with God.

In this season of Lent we are called to examine our own lives and determine whether we are offending Jesus with our behaviors.

If we are temples and Jesus walked into our lives, would he be driven into a frenzy to cleanse us?

My friends, it is not easy to be a Christian.

It is not easy to live our values everyday.

But it is what we have chosen to do.

We come together each week to empower one another to uphold our covenant with God.

We come together to remember that we are the Body of Christ, present in this world to bring God's kingdom into being.

The rules are simple; write them on your hearts

First, I must honor God,

Second, honor His Name,

Third, on His day be holy,

Fourth, I must be obedient,

Fifth, be kind and true,

Sixth, be pure in all I say and see and hear and do.

Seventh, I must be honest,

Eighth, be truthful in all things I say

Ninth, be pure in mind and heart and all I think and desire each day.

Tenth, I must be satisfied, not be jealous, come what may.

I believe we can do it. Working together, I believe that we can be temples that honor our loving and gracious God.