

The Fourth Step
Third Sunday of Lent
March 4, 2018
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Text: John 2:13-22

So I guess this is a bad time to tell you about the Pigs In The Blanket Fundraiser we are starting today for our youth groups.

One of my guilty pleasures in reading the parables and miracle stories of the gospels is that I get to play Arm Chair Jesus. See if you can relate. After reading and re-reading the gospel narratives for this many years, it can seem like they have a sort of formula. Jesus does or says something profound. The blind man, sinful woman, or leper on the receiving end of a miracle is healed and/or forgiven, then they walk away from the situation filled with praise and faith. Next queue the stock Pharisee or scribe spying nearby, wringing their hands in dismay because Jesus has done this work on the Sabbath, touches someone who is dirty, or **gasp** calls himself the Messiah. Finally, what parable would not be complete without the disciples acting completely confused and clueless about what has happened. No matter how many times they have seen these situations, no matter how many times Jesus has told them what to expect when they follow him, they completely miss the point of what is happening.

The disciples might not have things figured out, but I the reader CERTAINLY gets what is happening here. I mean, in just last Sunday's lectionary reading, we hear Peter not only misunderstanding Jesus, but also **rebuking** him when Jesus talks about his future suffering and death. Can any of you relate to my Arm Chair Jesus struggle?

Now certainly, I mean this in a way that is playful. But unless you read these stories carefully and with openness, it can feel a bit like you've read one, you've read them all.

And then this story in the gospel of John comes along. Jesus, all loving, wise, likeable, gentle Jesus, completely loses his cool. He makes a whip, uses it to drive these other-wise good, hard-working people out, and then starts flipping tables.

For crying out loud, what is happening here?!

And then to add insult to my injured ego, **THE DISCIPLES ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT IS GOING ON**. Their response in this is not to stop Jesus, confine him, rebuke him, or asking if he is getting enough “me” time, the scripture says that after Jesus drives everyone out, “His disciples remembered that it was written”. The disciples understand what’s happening and I do not.

Nothing like an angry Jesus to keep you humble.

Why doesn’t this make sense? Why is this Jesus so decidedly different than the Jesus we see elsewhere? Why is it that in other parables it is so easy to celebrate the underdog “good” guys and anticipate the come-uppance of the “bad guys”, but here it almost seems like Jesus is wrecked over the presence of the normal, everyday guy, the guy not doing anything evil, but the guys just doing their jobs, selling animals at the temple, which provided an actual service for all of those who would need unblemished animal for sacrifice for the upcoming Passover. Why is it that I, an avid reader and writer, a person who relishes metaphor and symbolism cannot make heads or tails of what I am supposed to learn here? Does this mean I do not have “ears to hear” as Jesus is oft to say after a particular difficult parable, especially to those who need its lesson the most?

I wonder if the reason it is so hard for me to hear and maybe for you too is because this one hits pretty close to home. This story isn’t about healing a blind man even if its on a holy day. This story isn’t about touching a man with leprosy even if it breaks a purity law. This story isn’t about seeing the deep well of love present in a woman, others see as sinful, because she bathed Jesus’s feet with her hair. This story is not one of the more obvious ones that teach a human being is more important than a law.

No, I wonder if this parable is so hard because it shifts our attention from being objective to being subjective. This parable doesn’t allow us to be an arm chair Jesus, cringing at the disciples and tsk-tsking the Pharisees, because this one is directed at people like us, right now, right here in our church today.

The people who knew better, the leaders of the temple, those who knew the scriptures, people like normal every day church leaders, had allowed the temple

to evolve into something it was not supposed to be. It could be that a practice that began as a convenience for pilgrims had devolved into something more insidious. It devolved to the point that something holy was treated flippantly and with disrespect. The temple, which should have been the great equalizer, was ground zero for division, dividing between the haves and have nots. For Jesus, who IS the living temple, the REAL temple, this is personal. Though he is living a life that is sacrificial, this means he is treated flippantly and with disrespect, by those who should know better.

So now, I want to pause on that thought and talk about something seemingly very different for a moment. I was first introduced to Al-Anon, the twelve step program for those who are in relationship with addicts, in my early 30's and over time practicing the twelve steps taught me how to properly care for myself and problems and conflicts that inevitably come our way. It taught me how to maintain my personal needs and boundaries while still being in relationship with others who had the potential to hurt me as their lives became more powerless. Perhaps you are familiar with the twelve steps?

It is the 4th Step 4 that I think connects for today: Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

There are some things in life we can control and others we cannot. But one of the best things we can do when we realize how powerless we are is to examine ourselves and honestly ask what needs to change. If we allow ourselves to become Armchair Jesuses, declaring that other communities and churches are “doing it wrong”, without first examining ourselves, we will experience spiritual anesthesia. We will not feel the log in our own eyes and no growth in greater communal unity will be possible.

Let's link this with a reflection I heard by social scientist and writer, Brenè Brown. In an interview with OnBeing's Krista Tippett, Brown speaks about how we as human beings are hard-wired to live in community or tribes and that if people are forced outside the tribe, the experience of being unwanted ultimately leads to our death. In fact, she defines spirituality as “the deeply held belief that we're inextricably connected to each other by something greater than us. And that thing that is greater than us is rooted in love and compassion.” So, for people groups to experience divisiveness is to deny our connectedness to each other and to God. We literally need each other. Brown describes the antidote to

divisiveness as sharing a huge collective emotional experience together, not unlike that which comes from sharing a great tragedy or a great joy. So if we approach those on the fringes of our tribe with the desire to share something together, despite feeling divided, we can remember that we are interconnected and grow in unity.

What would happen if we lived step #4 that is to fearlessly search ourselves AND reached out to the other we experience divisiveness with?

I don't know if you know this, but there is a wee bit of divisiveness within our country and even more specifically, within our denomination. I, for one, feel absolutely overwhelmed and powerless to affect change and figure a way forward. But this is no different than any other conflict I have in my life; I need to examine myself and ask if there is anything I might possibly be doing that contributes to the conflict. In fact, my contribution to conflict even if it is a small one, is the only act of control I have in a chaotic relationship. making a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself is my only path forward.

I invite you to do the same. Now a word about what a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves is NOT. This act does not require us to set down our convictions and the values we feel our important. We should still speak truth to injustices, but the key is to always do it with civility. I recently had an opportunity to learn this more acutely. I am on a civic committee that addresses social injustices in our city. The past several months things have gone swimmingly because all of us working together on the team have had the same values and priorities in what we'd like to see changed. However just recently a person on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum joined our group.

True confessions, this actually angered me! It angered me so much that I actually fantasized ways of making them look stupid in front of the rest of the group! Like bringing in a whoopee cushion or something. And I am a pastor!! Working in community with this person doesn't mean I silence my beliefs or diminish myself. But it DOES mean I am called to treat this other person with respect and proactively look for commonality if we are ever going to get anything accomplished. I am interconnected with this person whether or not I want to be.

We should resist the temptation to surround ourselves with false community, that is surround ourselves with only those who think as we do. Sorting ourselves into

bunkers does not create community, it only heightens isolation and loneliness. Great courage, only comes when we take a vulnerable risk in choosing to love another person and intentionally look for our commonality.

I think this is something our gospel story points us to. Our temple today, the church, the denomination and other ways we create our tribes can be good and supportive and life-giving, but our temple can devolve into something insidious and destructive, separating our tribe into bunkers. This devolution happens quietly, but is so insidious and destructive that Jesus just might flip a couple tables at General Synod, if given the opportunity. And could we blame him? What is it that we do that furthers this division and what might we be called upon to check? I do not pretend that this is easy work. It might be that a split is the inevitable way forward, as grievous as that would be. But what if a split can actually be avoided if we do the hard, vulnerable, soul-wrenching work of asking ourselves what WE need to change and finding what unites us instead of that which divides us and reminding those in the other bunker to do the same. Or perhaps our initiative in behaving in ways that are loving and civil will compel those with whom we are in conflict to do the same. Again, I am NOT saying that our work of justice is wrong or misguided; I believe that is righteous and necessary work. But is there a way to move forward on our call and love those who differ from us?

There are just over three months until General Synod and I am asking all of us corporately to commit to prayer for the work of Christ's church in this building, in our community, in our denomination and in the world. Let us be fearless in this search.

I would like to end today in the manner in which twelve step meetings around the world end, with the serenity prayer: God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, Courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.