

March 15, 2009  
Third Sunday in Lent  
John 2:13-22  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

## *OUT OF CONTROL*

You're out of control. Jesus, you're out of control in today's gospel.

He's not the gentle, kind, no-drama Jesus of our imagination. No, this Jesus loses it. He creates a scene in the temple. He drives out the moneychangers. He turns over the tables. He pours out the coins. "Stop it. Just stop it," he says. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace."

There they are right in the most sacred place, the temple. Along with mooing cattle. Cooing doves. Baaing sheep. "Old McDonald had a farm, ee-i-ee-i-o." Right there in the temple.

But wait a minute. What's going on here? Ordinary people had to buy animals for the temple sacrifice. And there had to be money changers. It would have been idolatrous to use Roman coins in the temple complex. So they set up "currency exchange" booths. Roman money needed to be converted into temple money. But there was abuse going on. Things got out of hand. Out of control. Greed takes over in the marketplace. And the ones controlling the money got rich at the expense of the poor. A biblical economic crisis, we might say!

Some might criticize the concept of the Jewish temple and sacrifices. But Jesus was an observant Jew. And he wasn't the first prophet to cry out against abuse in the temple. Micah and Amos were among those who called the people back to authentic worship grounded in justice. And we dare not say that in Christianity or other religions we don't miss the mark and move away from the core of our faith.

In other words, we create idols. We bow at the altar of money. Power. Sex. Possessions. Success. Drugs, alcohol, food. To name a few. Maybe the word for them today is addictions.

In last Sunday's column, Frank Rich quoted a line from Thornton Wilder's "Our Town. The Stage Manager says: "Whenever you come near the human race, there's layers and layers of nonsense." Rich says that we are currently working our way through the "aftershocks of the orgy of irresponsibility and greed that brought America" to this nadir... how lost we got in the boom before our bust."

Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel lost some \$37 million of his charitable foundation and personal wealth in Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme. "We gave him everything," Wiesel said. "We thought he was God."<sup>1</sup>

Thought he was God? How can we be so deceived? It's a story that gets repeated over and over in human history.

Our first reading today includes the Ten Commandments. Do not worship other gods, it begins. Do not make idols for yourselves. Oh, that can't be for us. We are here worshipping the one, true God. We are a very religious, if not Christian nation, according to many.

Then how do we find ourselves in such a mess? For those of us who feel that "sin" is an old-fashioned word or concept, all we have to do is open our eyes. Read the news. And look around us. We may give lip service to God. But we put our trust in other things. Idols, if you will. And our lives get out of control. And our world gets out of control.

Lutheran historian and theologian Martin Marty was asked to comment on the current economic crisis. He reminds us that the word "crisis" is related to judgment. We are making a judgment that things have got out of hand. Out of control. And that's a moral issue.

Marty believes the greatest immorality is in the belief that we were on our own. As is clear in this phrase: "He is a self-made man. And he worships his creator." That is the highest form of idolatry, Marty says.<sup>2</sup>

We believe that we are on our own. Not responsible for anyone but ourselves. Not accountable to anyone but ourselves. Self-made men and women.

Things are out of control. And it couldn't be more clear that the wisdom of the world will not save us. We proclaim Christ crucified, Paul says in our second reading. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. And God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

During the past months I have been meeting with four adults preparing for baptism at Easter. We have taken a look at the creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. We noted that the first commandments are about our relationship to God, the final ones

about our relationship to the neighbor. It is when we forget that we are not at the center of the universe, that we have put ourselves in the place of God, that we are connected to one another, and that we rise and fall together, it is then that we are collectively out of control.

The Jesus of today's gospel is a table-turning prophet. As one writer puts it: "I read the cleansing of the temple as a stark warning against any and every false sense of security. Misplaced allegiances, religious presumption, pathetic excuses, smug self-satisfaction, spiritual complacency, nationalist zeal, political idolatry, and economic greed in the name of God are only some of the tables that Jesus would overturn in his own day and in ours." (Daniel Clendenin)

So we gather these Lenten Sundays for some spring housecleaning. As part of our spiritual preparation for the feast of Easter. As Jesus cleansed the temple, we too long for the cleansing waters of baptism, the healing waters of Easter that renew our lives and redirect our paths.

There is a giving up of control in this Lenten invitation, this housecleaning of our souls. But it is good news and a new beginning. The first step in Alcoholics Anonymous is admitting that you are powerless over alcohol. But we could add: powerless over all our addictions, big and small. All our idols. All our false gods. All the things that make our lives unmanageable.

At the Easter Vigil Leslie, Alison, Gregg and Susan will stand among us. They will renounce the power of evil, confess the faith of the church, and then give up control as they die and rise with Christ. They are signs among us of the baptismal call we all share: to renounce the idols of our day, to worship God and to serve in the world.

Maybe that's why we are here, in this sacred place, this temple. For in this time of crisis, there is opportunity. There's got to be more to life than being self-made. So we gather around the wisdom of the cross. And the good news that we are created in God's image. And that we ... our very bodies, our very lives .... are the temple of God's presence.

<sup>1</sup>Frank Rich, "Some Things Don't Change in Grover's Corner," New York Times, March 8, 2009

<sup>2</sup>*Speaking of Faith* radio program, March 6, 2009; [www.speakingoffaith.org](http://www.speakingoffaith.org)