

## The Third Sunday in Lent-Year B-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 3.3.24

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

We are in week three of Lent, almost in the middle, or the muddle, as I am now calling it, based on all of the mud puddles that abound after this past week of snow and rain. If you've taken on a spiritual discipline, this is where the going gets tougher. If you haven't really gotten going yet, it's not too late. It's important to pay attention to the almost middle. In the almost middle of the ten commandments, sandwiched between the first 3 commandments and the final 6 commandments, is a commandment that takes up a lot of those stone tablets: remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. The sabbath is described as that holy place where the dignity of each human and the earth and its creator are acknowledged. Where right relationships are restored. The sabbath is a holy place in between those initial three commandments that focus on the relationship with God and the final six commandments that focus on relationships among all people. Remember that holy middle sabbath space, where God rests and bids us to do the same, to come and sit for a while. Remember that holy middle.

Turning to John, all four gospels tell of this moment, but in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the cleansing of the temple is the final catalyst that sets the events of Holy Week in motion: Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, lambasts the religious leaders for their complete disrespect for God's house of prayer and, outraged, they put a price on his head. The inexorable movement to the crucifixion begins. (In movies about Jesus, this is a dramatic highpoint—the only time in the script when Jesus gets to raise his voice.) The gospel of John, as usual, takes a different approach. Instead of losing his temper at the end of his life and ministry, Jesus loses it—in a big way—at the very beginning. Right after his very first miracle in John—when he turns water into wine at a festive wedding celebration in Cana—he goes away for a few days' of sabbath rest with his family and friends. He comes back, goes to the temple in Jerusalem and that's where the story picks up today. Some might say he needed a longer vacation or a longer holy middle sabbath space.

What we get here, though, in John, are two juxtapositions, on either side of that holy middle sabbath space: in one frame is the wedding at Cana, a feast with delicious food and friends and family and music and dancing and laughter and all the elements of the most joyous celebrations you've ever been to. Water is changed into wine and it is amazing and there is no end to it. The table in that story is not only filled with nourishing food for all, but it keeps getting bigger and bigger and messier and messier. There is room for all. Think of the toasts of love and affection that are often given at weddings. Whether given by family or friends, how many times have you heard these words: our family just expanded and I am so glad! Hearts are big and filled with generosity and compassion. That's the first frame.

The second frame (today's gospel) is the complete opposite. The table is piled high, not with good food and drink, but with money that is being exchanged. Business is thriving

for a few people, but everything that is taking place is based on performance and profit for some, not all. And it isn't just that. Those animals are inside, not where they should be, being bought and sold for a price. All of God's creation is desecrated, treated as part of the marketplace: valued or devalued based on what they have to offer and how much they are worth. And this desecration is happening in the middle of holy sabbath, the very place created for the restoration and renewal of relationships with God and one another.

One story is centered on abundance and transformation, with a table set with a feast, where sacred relationships are full and fuller. The other focuses on scarcity and transaction, with a table used for counting coins and measuring worth, where sacred relationships get small and smaller. That's the table Jesus overturns.

Joan Chittister, the Benedictine writer and practitioner, has a book titled, *How Shall We Live?* Chittister begins with this simple acknowledgement of the times we are living in: "It is a moment again in human history that needs deep wisdom." So, she asks, *How shall we live?* And this is where we go back to that middle holy space of the sabbath, the holy ground that roots us in returning and restoration. The almost-middle vantage that point to loving God (the first 3 commandments) and loving one another (the final six commandments). Or, in the gospel of John, that holy almost-middle space between the wedding and the temple, when Jesus and his family and friends go away for a few days' restorative sabbath. On this almost-middle Sunday at the almost-middle of Lent, it's where we stand this morning: ready to be restored and renewed before going out, yet again, into the fray filled with so many opportunities to choose. In one direction, there is a feast, where the food is seasoned with hope and healing. In the other, scarcity and value-based relationships.

The *Laramie Project* is a play based on over 200 interviews conducted over the course of a year and a half, in the wake of the beating and killing of 21-year old Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. Last night was the first performance put on by Oak Harbor High School students. It continues next weekend up at the Whidbey Playhouse. Near the end of the play, one of the characters (words from an actual interview) says that somehow out of the hate that led to the murder of Matthew Shepard, somehow hope emerged. *H.O.P.E.*, he says. How shall we live? By stepping towards abundance and H.O.P.E.

Today's reading from Exodus starts: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* The people of God (we) are already free. That's Jesus's point. Why choose the small, transaction-based existence, when the wedding banquet is right here? The wedding at Cana puts forth a vision for relationships at their fullest. (The wedding had nothing to do with the two people getting married. They are completely offstage.) It's all about the vows that God has made and kept, how God is in it for the long-haul and how our hearts get stretched, to hold love, and disappointment and difficulty and forgiveness and return and H.O.P.E.—all part of transformation. The religious community—whether it's the temple community in the gospel or the community of St. Augustine's-in-rthe-Woods on Whidbey Island—is meant

to spread and share and serve the gospel feast to all and with all. It's why we exist: to live generously and share love indiscriminately.