

March 3, 2024 Third Sunday of Lent

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Exodus 20:1-3 and John 2:13-22

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

This week, I'm celebrating one year with you, as your Interim Pastor! I began ministry here with lots of one-on-one meetings with you. Some with coffee, some with tea, some with walks . . . getting acquainted, and learning what matters to you, and sharing about myself. And then, in those first eight months, I met with the Transition Team, before it became the new pastor Call Committee.

In those conversations, and especially with the Transition Team, I noticed that when we share honestly of ourselves, when there are differences, and when we struggle hear one another, we grow. Especially, as the Transition Team was actively clarifying values, priorities and deeply and passionately held beliefs-- when we felt we had been heard, and when we came to consensus --there was a palpable sense of God's grace at work in the group. That grace gives us a wonderful feeling of meaning and purpose. It's the very basis of being the body of Christ, together.

Pastor Terry Moe expressed it so beautifully in the podcast with Kyler last Friday, that in relationships, like marriage, and in church, when we dig down into these struggles, we realize that, together, we are more than the sum of our parts. Getting to that place, though, sometimes requires a dismantling of what's already in place. I believe that helps in our understanding of what is going on in the Gospel reading for today. Jesus was dismantling a well-established system in order for there to be new life. New life in God and with one another.

Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time of Passover. Historians note that Jerusalem's population would triple at the Passover, with pilgrims from all over. It was a loud, noisy time and place. The pilgrims needed the proper coinage to make purchase of the animals for sacrifice. This system of animal sacrifice was most oppressive to those with the least. The wealthiest could afford sheep or cattle for sacrifice. The poorest pilgrims spent their money on the doves. When Jesus confronted those selling doves, he said: "Take those things out of here!" Jesus was protesting the temple system that oppressed the poorest, requiring their money in order to "be right" with God. It was more than a cleansing—it was an ejection, an exorcism.

This scene grabs our attention: an angry Jesus, wielding a whip of ropes, and driving thousands out from the temple: cattle, sheep, doves, and people. In this Jesus, we see passion, and righteous anger.

The expulsion from the Temple is found in all four of the Gospels. In the synoptics, this story is placed near the end of the Gospel, and is an explanation of why Jesus got in trouble with the religious authorities. But in the Gospel of John, it's very near the beginning, and follows right after the changing of water to wine at the wedding in Cana. There's an important connection between the wedding at Cana, and Jesus' expulsion at the temple. Understanding today's passage requires reading these parts together.

In the Gospel of John, the overall message is this: Jesus shows us that the dream of God for us is life in true harmony with one another, and the earth. For that true harmony to emerge, first, the earthly systems of power must be dismantled.

So first, we have the joyful wedding. The vision is of healing of God's relationship to God's people, and the joyful, overflowing abundance of the world in right relationship. But in order to get to that restored relationship, what's needed first, is the dismantling of the systems that are obstacles to that union. It all begins with a dismantling of systems that oppress the vulnerable.

The Lenten season is a season when we are invited to ask, what needs uprooting, or dismantling for us at this point in the life of the church, in order to be in closer relationship to God and with one another? Our Council decided last December that they very much want to meet one-on-one with people in the congregation, in order to build new relationships, and to see where God is among us. That's a wonderful place to begin.

Whether in the congregation, or on Council, in work, or school, or family, or friendship, we sometimes need to destruct, in order to build anew. I have a person who is important in my life, with I experience this. It seems that we periodically need a dismantling of our individual patterns, and different views, in order to see one another more clearly, and build something deeper.

Another thing that Pastor Terry Moe noted is that when we encounter resistance, growth is happening. I find that heartening, don't you? Think about it. When did it feel like we hit a wall? When do you encounter resistance? Whatever the relationship, perhaps we can see resistance as the edge of growth. Friends, be of good courage—Jesus said “Destroy this temple and in three days, I'll raise it up!” He meant the temple of his body. . . but as we walk through Lent and the passion and resurrection, we can take heart. God is with us!

Perhaps what we've seen over the past few years, all across our nation, with the removal of confederate statues, and place names of confederate leaders, we are witnessing a dismantling that brings hope for a more just and peaceful world.

There's a park, in Eagle Pass, Texas, which is right on the border with Mexico. Governor Greg Abbott used an emergency order to take control of the city park and ban the U.S. Border Patrol from operating at Shelby park, as an anti-migrant measure. But, now there is a possibility of that park being renamed. It was originally named after Major General Joseph Orville Shelby, a decorated Confederate cavalry officer, and a fierce defender of slavery. But when the South lost its war to keep slavery, Shelby and his troops refused to surrender to Union forces. Instead, he and about a thousand of his followers fled into Mexico.

Now, local activists want to change the name of Shelby Park. Juanita Martinez, one of the activists, said “. . .we may not get into the park, but maybe - maybe - we can change the name.” Names being considered are Peace Park or People's Park or even after Ulysses Grant: “I'm a Grant Park—i.e. Immigrant Park.” A potential dismantling of the powers that could lead to new hope.

Friends, be of good courage. We are loved by One who will not let us go, and who walks with us every step of our journey. And Christ will tear down the divisions rendered by human beings: those divisions between the respected and the marginalized, rich and poor, friends and enemies, Jews and Gentiles, citizen and sojourner. In change, and in resistance, we are loved by a God whose dream for us is a joyful feast of justice and peace.