

# KEEPING IT REAL

Lord of the overturning, your passion sweeps away the calculating religion, the pious profiteering which keep us safely outside the holy places: may we find our way through the debris of all that protected us to find your dangerous heart and our world upside down; through Jesus Christ, our exiled Lord.

*From Prayers for an Inclusive Church, Steven Shakespeare*

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT  
EXODUS 20:1-17, PSALM 19, 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25, JOHN 2:13-2  
MARCH 4, 2018

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## THE GOSPEL READING: JOHN 2:13-2

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

For Jesus, keeping it real meant and continues to mean doing what it takes for God to be reconnected to humanity. He was and is all about union.

And, yes, that continual work arises from the undying love of God for humanity.

The collect today refers to Jesus's dangerous heart – that kept Jesus outside the lines, over the barricades and taking risks that ended his life in betrayal, suffering and death, not to make us in any sense guilty or shameful but to reveal God's presence, to make it clear that,

for God, there is *nothing to lose* in overturning the destructive patterns of this world, to facing off with all that coerces and demeans, distances, damages, or destroys any person.

So this scene in the temple was not about piously defending the institution of the temple from corruption, it was not about the dignity of the established religion being undermined or sullied by commercial interests. In fact, the whole process *was operating the way it was supposed to operate*, according to the understanding of the day.

People needed to offer certain

sacrifices in a certain way and those who were changing money and selling were helping people, who had travelled great distances, have what they needed to make their sacrifice. Transportation in those days didn't always allow bringing live animals on many days' journeys and the increasing number of urban dwellers didn't have access to the animals and grains required for the sacrifices.

But ALL OF THAT kept people distant from God... the whole system was arrayed *against* the people it was supposed to serve. And, of course, the impoverished were completely on the outside with no money to change or buy.

So Jesus was not on a consulting trip, advising temple authorities on best practices, efficiencies and effectiveness in a temple that is client-centered or service-oriented.... No, Jesus was delivering the news that it was over and done.

Hard to hear.

We know, because Jesus turns *our* lives upside down (*or attempts to do so*) with some regularity and mostly we don't like it – whether it is our individual lives or our life together in this faith community.

In his book *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* Fr. Richard Rohr writes:

“The very architecture of the temple revealed what Jesus was trying to reform. The design of the building named and protected degrees of worthiness, as early stage religion always does. At the center

was the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest could enter, and on only one day a year. This was surrounded by the court of the priests and the Levites, which only they could enter. Outside that there was the court of the circumcised Jewish men, which only they could enter.

“The outer court of the temple was the court of the Jewish women, although [in a patriarchal culture], during their menstruating years, they could rarely enter the court, because of beliefs about blood, menstruation, labor, and ritual purity (see Leviticus 15:19-30). Outside this entrance there was a carved sign warning non-Jews, who entered the temple, that they would be punished by death.”

So set in stone in the temple was the *very* alienation that God in Jesus was moving across in becoming a flesh and blood human being, announcing the reality of God for all humans, mutually female and male, the whole constellation of human gender and sexual orientation, for the whole creation, for you, for me, for our neighbors and friends, for those who are like us, for those we dislike or don't understand, for those who threaten us, and for our enemies for whom we pray (because Jesus taught us how).

We live in an era that has vast challenges and also stunning creative opportunities – especially those of us engaged in all of the questions that arise in a life of faith and in a community of faith that serves the world. This era is usually defined in “post” categories: post-Christian, post-Christendom, post-

Constantinian, postmodern, post-Enlightenment, post-institutional.

We live in a global context we can't completely see or understand among boundaries that are constantly shifting. The current political foment and cultural anxiety is a reaction to this pervasive and unyielding truth that has come upon the world rapidly and comparatively recently. In the face of universal change, some are saying "change back" – which is not going to happen – no matter how fearfully and intensely someone says it.

Old-fashioned explanations and definitions, including the religion of the mind (which consisted of thinking thoughts or ideas about God) have failed. We are recognizing that mind, heart, soul, and body are integrated and the locus of immediate revelation of the Divine, the Sacred, essentially connected to all other people and the whole of creation. We seek practices, actual engagement to "keep it real" in the way Jesus threw over the routinized patterns of the temple that didn't actually do anything for anybody – except for those in power.

So to fill-in a bit: the gathering of people who continued to be associated with Jesus in the first 300 years after the crucifixion and resurrection were a more-or-less ragtag lot that seemed to express, from the margins (unevenly, of course), his non-hierarchical, service and reconciliation approach to being in the world.

From about the 4<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what emerged with the

conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great was a religion like the Judaism of Jesus's day, a patterned way of wielding power through systems and methods, dogma and doctrine that *selectively* included or excluded, that benefitted some and made others anathema – insiders and outsiders.

That era, and I'm speaking broadly, of course, is known as the Constantinian or Christendom era of the church. Some call it the era of the Constantinian *captivity* of the church. My late friend Verna Dozier referred to the conversion of Constantine as "the second fall."

Most of what many of us have known as "church" was patterned to express this Constantinian or Christendom religion that, strangely, ironically, was the very thing represented in Jesus's actions in the temple from today's gospel reading – only now the religion he would be driving out of the "temple" with his whip of cords was a religion that was conducted in his name.

Since the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century and now accelerating in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the "Lord of the overturning" has been at it again.

Each year now there is more of a sense of what is emerging in the detritus of the dying or dead church of Christendom, that has been abandoned nearly wholesale by the majority of people. Again, it is worth saying that this is a truly exhilarating era in which to live in and as a faith community, while it is challenging and calls us to being truly alert and active in who we are and what we do.

Called many things, none of them fully expressive of our current life as Christ-followers, as friends of Jesus in new, multiple, as-yet-to-be-seen patterns, this post-Christendom, new apostolic, new reformation, emergent church is our attempt to “find our way through the debris” of all that closed the door on, protected and walled-off Jesus and God’s life and witness as human flesh and blood from the flesh and blood people and the created order Jesus reconnected to the totality of God.

In the aftermath of the temple overturning, Jesus moved on, consistently bearing a message of the immediate presence and availability of God to everyone, all the time (we don’t need to say: multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious, racially diverse or whatever). Life, now revealed, includes everyone and everything and is Real God, right here, right now, 24/7, no exceptions.

In saying all of this in a consumer culture, there *is* a risk that we hear something like Amazon Prime, where we can get God or *something we want* from God on a moment’s notice without the complication of a religious institution or something else complicating and demanding, analogous to a retail store.

The reality of God is much *more* radical (and complicating and demanding)....

Some of you will recognize that

pretty much every week for the past couple of months I have offered you this from the 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic, monk, and author Thomas Merton from his book *Seeds of Contemplation* (1945). Merton wrote: “To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that Love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”

And *everyone* is made in the image of God.

So, better than Amazon Prime, no drone needed, God is already here, all is already here, in us and with us. And so the practices we engage, the action we take in expressing Christ’s living, loving Spirit *is* the overturned new reality that is the concern of each of us and of our life together, NOW. This is what motivates our work... of which there is so much, including the work on our community or collaborative kitchen... our assertion is that the kitchen is Love’s Kitchen, to *draw people*, each of whom is named “Love,” *together*, to experience first-hand *together*, the Unity that is God’s life, that was and is Jesus’s way.

In who we are and in what we do, wherever we are, all the time: the overthrowing continues, the dangerous heart of Jesus keeps beating, ever more strongly, we pray, in us, in who we are, and in what we do.