

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 1, 2018

John 2:13-22 (+ 1 Cor. 1:18-25 and Exodus 20)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you ever been used by somebody? Have you ever had someone become your friend because it worked to their advantage somehow? Because you could do something for them? Because you could connect them to somebody? Or maybe you been the one who has befriended someone else because of something you wanted from them. People who are rich and famous have this problem all the time. They constantly have to be on guard for people looking to take advantage of them. Maybe that's why they tend to make friends with other people who are already rich and famous – people who are less likely to want something from them besides friendship.

When I was in grade school, there was a kid in my class who started hanging around with me. At some point he invited me for a sleepover, and we did the things that you do on a sleepover. Stayed up late, watched TV, played with his toys. I don't really remember the details. What I remember is that in the morning he made these breakfast sandwiches for us. They were his own recipe, he said, and they had a secret ingredient that he wouldn't tell me, because he was going to start a business with these sandwiches and make loads of money. When we finished, he asked me if I wanted another one, and when I said, "sure," he said, "OK, but you're going to have to pay me for this one." So I said no thanks. It was weird. Not the sort of thing a friend would do, I thought. I don't know if he ever made a go of that business. Our friendship didn't last very long after that.

Believe it or not this dynamic of friendships turning out to be less than we expected or hoped for can help us understand what's going on in our readings this morning, and give us some important insight into our relationship with God as we continue our self-examination in this season of Lent. Jesus gets rowdy in today's Gospel reading. He protests what is going on in the Temple. And it is not a peaceful protest. He upends tables and pours out money jars. He makes a whip and drives the animals off of the Temple grounds. Why is he so upset? What is he objecting to?

Before I answer that, let's take a minute to remember what the temple was – and how the people of Israel understood its place in their relationship with God. The Temple was God's house. It was the place on earth where showed up to interact with God's people. It wasn't really God's idea, but God eventually allowed King Solomon to build the Temple. And this then became the place where God's people came to connect with God through the practice of animal sacrifice.

So the Temple is God's house. Jesus accepted that, at least for the time being. He gets upset then because instead of treating the Temple as God's house, the place to interact with God – to confess sins and receive forgiveness – people are treating it as a market-place. It's not just the buying and selling of animals that has Jesus upset, or the changing of money from the idolatrous coins of the Romans into the temple currency. There were good reasons for doing those things.

What Jesus objects to here is that people were dealing with God the way you would deal with a merchant in a market: making a deal to get what they need from God at the least cost to themselves. We don't have those kinds of markets much anymore. Maybe farmers markets, but it's not really in our cultural playbook to negotiate our everyday purchases. The one place we still try to bargain is when buying a car. I don't know about you, but that experience always leaves me with a bad taste in my mouth, and a less than charitable attitude towards the

salesperson, however nice we've been to each other's faces. It's not how I would interact with a friend, or a member of my family.

Do you begin to see the problem that Jesus is objecting to here? It's treating the relationship with God as a business transaction rather than an intimate, personal relationship. "I am the Lord your God," God tells the people at Mt. Sinai in our first reading, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" "I am your God, you are my people." This is a relationship we're in here. I rescued you for a purpose, to be blessed by me in order to live a good, worthwhile life, and to bless one another."

You see, God created us to be in a relationship with God and with one another, not to use God and one another to achieve our personal goals and agendas. God doesn't want to be our genie, or our co-pilot, or our personal assistant. God wants a genuine, vital loving relationship with us. And God wants the same for all of our relationships with each other.

Of course it wasn't just the people of the first century who related to God this way. We do it too, don't we? We treat God as someone who can help us to live the kind of life we want to live, a life that is focused on ourselves and those who are close to us. We use God to get us out of trouble, to heal us when we're sick, to repair our relationships when they're broken, to enrich us when we're down on our luck. And of course we often treat one another that way too.

Jesus should not be surprised, either at the people of Israel or at us. The religious impulse in humankind has always treated God or the gods as a means to our own ends. And our interpersonal relationships have always been about looking out for our interests and advantages over against others. The institution of marriage is a case in point. For most of human history it has been about creating alliances and improving the extended family prospects. Only relatively recently have we made it about love and fulfillment. So Jesus should not be surprised at how we treat our relationships with God and one another. But Jesus is not content to let our past performance determine our future results. In Jesus, God is up to something new and better for us. That's what the wedding at Cana was about, which happens right before our reading today. That was the meaning of the "better wine saved for last." God is doing something new and better in Jesus. God has come among us as one of us in Jesus to share our life, to truly connect with us, and to endure with us all that life can throw at us, to be not only our God, but our brother and parent, deeply and intimately connected with us. This new thing that God is up to in Jesus is so at odds with our business as usual that it ends up killing Jesus. But God will not let that be the end of the story, or the end of God's quest to make this new thing a reality. Jesus incarnation and crucifixion take him from life through death to new and better life. Paul call it foolishness. And it is, when everything we learn leads us to avoid death at all costs. It's scandalous. Not how we think God should act. But it is the way to genuine, authentic, relational life with God and one another that God has been working to create since the dawn of time, life that is able to endure whatever may come.

What would our lives look like if we really believed that? How would we treat one another differently? How would we treat God differently? What if, as part of our Lenten discipline, we acted this week as if we did believe it? What would it be like if for a day, or two, or three, we treated other people not as means to our ends or bit players in our personal scripts, but as beloved bearers of the image of God. It might give us a glimpse of where God in Jesus Christ is leading us. May God grant us such a vision, and give us this week the faith we need to move in that direction. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.