

“Looking at the Finger”

John 2:13-22

March 15, 2009

There is a Buddhist saying about a teacher pointing his finger at the moon, and the mindless student seeing only the finger. How many of you have been able to train your pet to look at what you are pointing to, rather than coming to sniff your finger? Jesus encountered the same problem with the religious institution of his day—people had been worshipping the religious trappings, the Temple, the priests, the business of sacrifices, rather than worshipping the true God. That’s why he finally lost his cool and wrecked the temple and the religious marketers—“You’ve got it all wrong! This is not what God wants!”

But it was what the religious institution wanted:

- Cattle, sheep, and doves were required for burnt offerings in the Temple.
- Passover was a pilgrimage feast, and many traveled long distances and couldn’t bring animals with them.
- They needed to buy animals in Jerusalem.
- The Temple tax could not be paid in Greek or Roman coinage because of emperors’ image on coin—so worshipers must change their money into acceptable Temple money.

- Jesus challenges the very authority of the Temple and its worship.
- The purity system (Be holy as God is holy) had become the finger and the moon had nearly disappeared. It was too burdensome and too expensive for common folk to do all that was required to be acceptable to God—according to the Temple system of the day.
- Jesus was not against the Jews—he was a Jew; but he was against the ‘purity system.’

In his book "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time," Marcus Borg sees Jesus challenging this vast purity system. It was a system that had profound implications for all of life: "*...the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries; between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile...*" an elaborate system of purification had been developed. Some things were considered pure and others impure. Women were impure seven days after the birth of a son, 14 days after the birth of a daughter. Dead bodies were impure. People with blemishes such as leprosy were impure. Certain foods were impure and almost anything sexual was impure. The list had gotten very, very long. *The temple was at the heart of the purity system. Jesus'*

disruption that day in the temple was a powerful sign of Jesus' disruption of the way things were.

This story is not about gentle Jesus meek and mild showing some 'manly' anger and flexing his muscles. There are times in life when anger is appropriate, but too often anger is just flying off the handle and doing something stupid.

It is an old story, but a good one. Former baseball manager Billy Martin told it in his autobiography titled Number 1. He says he and Mickey Mantle were doing a little hunting down in Texas. Mickey had a friend who would let him hunt on his ranch. When they got there, Mickey told Billy to wait in the car while he went in and cleared things with his friend. Permission was quickly granted for them to hunt, but the owner asked Mickey to do him a favor. He had a pet mule in the barn who was going blind and he didn't have the heart to put him out of his misery. He asked Mickey to shoot the mule for him. Mickey agreed.

On the way back to the car a plan formed in Mantle's mind. Reaching the car, he pretended to be angry. He scowled and slammed the car door shut. Billy wanted to know what was wrong. Mickey replied that the owner wouldn't let them hunt there after all. "I am so mad at that guy that I am going

out to that barn and shoot one of his mules," said Mantle. He drove like a mad man to the barn.

Martin protested and said, "We can't do that!" But Mickey was adamant, "Just watch me," he shouted. When they got to the barn, Mantle jumped out of the car with his rifle, ran to the barn and shot the mule and killed it. When he got back to the car he saw that Martin had also taken his gun out and smoke was curling from its barrel, too.

"What are you doing, Martin?" he yelled. Martin answered, "We'll show that Sonofagun. I killed two of his cows." --King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com

Jesus' life and ministry challenged the rules that named things and people pure or impure. Such categories were overturned by God's compassion. For Marcus Borg it is this conflict between purity codes and compassion that shapes Jesus' ministry. He says: "In the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion."

Too often we get stuck on the finger and don't even notice the beauty of the moon. Too often we get focused on what we think is right and proper and

don't even noticed the beauty of other people, other cultures, other religions. Too often we're focused on staying clean rather than on love of neighbor and love of so-called 'enemy.'

The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lunblad tells of her childhood: *We were suspicious of Roman Catholics even though there wasn't a Catholic church in my small Iowa town. Bingo was further proof that Catholics were up to no good because they played bingo in church and Lutherans didn't. We were always waiting for Jesus to come and overturn the bingo tables, sending the cards flying all over the church basement and spilling the little numbers out of the cage that spun them around. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Jesus would shout as he tipped over the cash boxes. We were quite sure that Jesus would not have been upset with our oyster stew supper or the strawberry festival to raise money for missions.*

All religious institutions should fear Jesus' wrath. The United Methodist Church has been declining for 40 years. We have such a heavy bureaucracy that we are in danger of sinking beneath our own weight.

There is a powerful scene in the movie, *The Godfather, Part III*. The Godfather, Don Corleone,

is forced to visit the distinguished Cardinal Lamberto to tell him the bad news that a legitimate business deal involving the Vatican Bank has gone bad. The bank is run by the Archbishop and a coalition of Catholic businessmen. The Cardinal listens to the Godfather; then the Cardinal says something quite profound. He picks up a stone and says, "Look at this stone. It has been lying in the water for a very long time. The water has not penetrated it." Then he smashes the stone. "Look," he says peering at the smashed insides of the stone, "perfectly dry. The same thing," the Cardinal continues, "has happened to men in Europe. They have been surrounded by Christianity for centuries, but Christ does not live in their hearts."

This is exactly what happened to the Temple in Jesus' time. There were people in the Temple who had been surrounded by the Temple for years, but the God of the Temple had not been allowed to enter their lives nor penetrate their hearts. As St. Paul once put it, "They had the form of godliness, but not the real thing." The hardest hearts in this world are not among the ungodly, but among the Godly." --Jef Olson, *Reassessment of Ministry*

How can we focus on what really matters? And what really matters to God? *I* have the answer. Aren't you excited? God is Love. If any thought, if

any action is not based on love for God and neighbor as yourself, then it needs to be turned over, tossed out.

What makes you angry, or righteously “indignant?”

- Is it seeing a soured, surly adult start to berate and then beat a slightly whiny child in the grocery store?
- Is it overhearing or being party to a cruel, gossipy conversation aimed at hurting a friend?
- Is it discovering a homeless man pawing through your garbage can?
- Is it stumbling onto a secret "toxic dumper" rolling big drums of who-knows-what into a secluded bend in a favorite river?
- Is it catching a poacher taking aim at a protected animal?
- Is it seeing an elderly woman being bullied by a gang of bored kids?

Do we still have the ability to get whip-cracking mad for God's sake? What needs to be cleaned out of our establishment religions and bureaucratized institutions in order to once again make our churches places where the Holy Spirit blows and breathes its life into all who worship there? -----

Homiletics online

To know and to serve God, of course, is why we're here, a clear truth, that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard. But a little faith will see you through. What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word.

What is the last word, then?

*Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids - all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through. --Garrison Keillor, *We Are Still Married*, New York: Viking, 1989. From the essay: *The Meaning of Life*.*

Ahh, then, let the gravy of God's love soak into all of life, and let the grace shine through. Amen.