
Put your hand in
Chapel in the Park United Church
March 3, 2024
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Based on Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13-22

Welcome to the third Sunday in Lent. That puts us - give or take - in the middle of Lent. Half-way between Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. How are you enjoying the journey so far? Have you seen vistas of new opportunities? Has your spiritual life become deeper? Or have you been too distracted to really get into Lent yet? Perhaps you prefer to wait for the final sprint during Holy Week?

Are you waiting for the next bus? Are you waiting for a different bus? Are you waiting for anything at all? Or are you - like me - somewhere along the journey of Lent, and grappling with the fact that I'm not exactly sure where I am.

Mid-journey it's easy to feel a bit lost. Ash Wednesday is a fixed point. Holy Week is a fixed point. But where are we now? If you feel a bit lost like I do, it's ok. That's what the middle of most journeys feels like. Lent reminds me of sailing from one port to another. The beginning and the end points of the journey are known, safe harbours. But in the middle of the journey when we are out in open water, we are not always sure exactly where we are.

It just occurred to me - perhaps some of you do NOT feel lost right now. Well, keep listening and I will do my best to help you feel lost in the middle of Lent. I am not doing this to be cruel. But by embracing our sense of "lost" in the middle of Lent, perhaps the end of Lent will be more sweet. Think of every trip you have even been on. You can't have an adventure without some uncertainty along the journey.

In any case, into this middle-of-the-journey, the authors of the lectionary give us two well-known stories. The exodus version of the 10 commandments, and the story of Jesus chasing the merchants out of the temple. Are the lectionary authors as lost on the journey as we are. Or is there some reason why the 10 commandments and the cleansing of the temple might be relevant in the middle of Lent?

Well, I can think of a few reasons why these stories might be relevant in the

middle of Lent. But today I'm going to suggest that both stories simply highlight the fact that - in the middle of our Lenten journey - we do, in fact, feel lost. Not lost geographically of course. But lost in the sense that we are not seeing in our day to day lives what we might hope to see. Lost in the sense that our expectations are not being met. Lost in the sense that reality does not quite match up with our hopes and dreams. Lost in the sense that “fixed” points in our faith, the 10 commandments and the ministry of Jesus, are not as well located as we thought. Because the more we think about these two stories, the more uncomfortable they become. And more to the point, the more uncomfortable we become.

Perhaps you think that's over-stated. Perhaps you're right.

Consider the exodus version of the story of the 10 commandments. Does that seem like familiar territory to us? The commandments are familiar. Perhaps they are so familiar that we hear them in a nuanced language. A language that has eased our discomfort with the text. Perhaps we hear the commandments in words that make us believe that we actually follow them. I mean, ... we don't bow to idols, do we? We don't worship strange gods, do we? It's been a long time since I last coveted anybody's donkey. As law-abiding Canadian citizens, isn't it obvious that we follow the 10 commandments? The problem with society is that other people don't follow the commandments? We are just fine, right?

Well, that depends on how we read the text, and how we understand our own reality.

For example, what if St. Augustine was right when he said, “Anything you have more than you need is stolen from the poor.” Would that make all of us guilty of theft?

What if Jesus was right in the sermon on the mount when he said, “you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder or you shall be liable to judgement’ ... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement.”? What if paying our governments to commit murder makes us murderers ourselves? What if the Arab expression “if someone dies of hunger, their neighbours must be tried for murder” is right? Does that make all of us guilty of murder?

What if taking the Lord's name in vain does not just mean not swearing, but also

means not using religion for unholy purposes. Like using religion to justify slavery, racism, and misogyny. Like using religion to create barriers between the people of the world. Separating God's children into “us” and “them”. What if taking the Lord’s name in vain includes using religion to foster intolerance like Islamophobia? What is taking the Lord’s name in vain includes committing genocide because of religious ideologies? What if taking the Lord’s name in vain includes not speaking up against injustice when we see it? Do those things make us all guilty of taking the Lord’s name in vain?

What if keeping the sabbath is not about coming to church once a week. But rather, about creating space and time in our daily lives for our own spiritual nurture, reflection, and care. What if keeping the sabbath means living as if our faith actually matters?

The “Sunday School” version of the 10 commandments can be followed, but the adult version cannot. We might be able to live up to the letter of the commandments, but we cannot live up to the spirit of the commandments. So, reading the 10 commandments today is a reminder that we are lost on our journey. And that life - even our life of faith - is not as simple as we might like. Expectations and reality simply do not coincide. We are lost at this point on our journey.

And what about the story of Jesus clearing the temple? Don't we all just love that story, where Jesus heroically challenges the religious powers of his day? This story is the closest we get to Jesus as a crime-fighter. Jesus as a role model for Steven Seagal. Besides, righteous indignation is always in style isn't it?

But wait a minute. During Advent didn't we sing about Jesus as gentle, quiet, well-behaved? You remember, “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes”. Don't we want our saviour to be gentle, loving, and well-behaved? What's with flipping tables and whipping people?

[show Jesus picture]

This is a very classic picture of Jesus. He is white of course even though he should be brown. But - as we discussed this week during our Lenten groups - look at this image. This Jesus not only looks fresh out of a shower. He looks fresh off the cover of Vogue magazine. Immaculate hair, clean clothes. I'll bet he even smells nice. We like this

image - perhaps not the white skin. How do we feel about the fact that the actual Jesus would not have been clean with a perfect wardrobe, perfect hair. A Jesus who likely smelled like the people we sit far away from on the bus?

And what is with this story about Jesus making a whip and driving both people and animals out of the temple? Is that what we expect from Jesus? Is this what we want? Or in this story are we meeting a Jesus that we may or may not approve of? Meeting a Jesus that is just as human as we are. The next time that someone asks you, “what would Jesus do?”, remind them that flipping tables and whipping people are legitimate options. And let me know what kind of reaction you get.

Moreover, we might be wondering exactly what Jesus was reacting to. These “money changers” were an important element in the religious functioning of the temple system. They allowed foreigners to exchange their money and purchase animals of the right quality to make the required ritual sacrifices. Without the money changers and the sellers, pilgrims could not have made their sacrifices at the temple. Besides, that, the temple in Jerusalem had many different courts. The selling would have been in one of the outer courts, not in the more holy inner spaces. It’s not exactly obvious what Jesus was objecting to.

And what exactly do we think of this angry Jesus? When you put yourself into the story, where do you find yourself? Would you be helping Jesus flip tables? Would you be on the receiving end of the whip? Would you be watching from the side, not sure what to expect next? Would you be running out the door? Would you be one of the disciples, wondering what on earth you had gotten yourself into?

Whatever side you are on, the story is scandalous. We are not in Kansas any more. We are not comfortable with this story because in it we meet a Jesus we do not expect. The story upsets our image of Jesus as calm, pastoral, peaceful. That perhaps is our big problem with the story. It’s not that we cannot relate to it. It’s that we relate too well to it. We are the buyers and the sellers. Reading the story today reminds us that we are lost on our lenten journey. We are lost because reality is not conforming to our expectations.

Black History Month is over. And I want to share one thing that I learned this year. Because during Black History Month I always try to hear some new stories about

Black people. And then I see what I can learn from the stories. I look for what I learn from the stories themselves. And I look for what I learn about myself from my reaction to what I learn from the stories. Learning Black History is pretty easy these days, because all of the networks and streaming platforms curate material for Black History Month. The story I want to share came to me from an unexpected source. My watch.

Apple has a program called “Time to Walk” where people are encouraged to go for a walk while being accompanied by a person who has a story to share. And during February, most of those stories came from black people. I heard quite a few of them during February.

I was struck by the story of Draymond Green, a basketball player with the NBA. I share this story along with the confession that I don’t understand basketball very well. Feel free to let me know at coffee time if I do not understand Green’s story properly. But the way I heard Green tells his story, in 2015 he - and 2 other players brought a transformation to basketball. Prior to that time, players were selected based on who was the best in a particular position: centre, point guard, etc. Green was not the best at any position. But he was very good in every position. He also had the spatial awareness and game sense to help his teammates be in the right place at the right time. Green was not the best centre, or power forward, or shooting guard. But he excelled in being quite good at all of them. And he was flexible. Instead of thinking, “I’m the point guard so I need to be here right now”. He reacted to what was happening on the court. He became whatever position he needed to be at the time. He became whatever position was needed based on how the play was unfolding.

And his story reminded me of Chapel in the Park United Church. Chapel in the Park is still a very young congregation. Formed of course from the amalgamation of Don Mills United Church and Thorncliffe Park United Church. Most of our “past” is as separate congregations. And we are in the process of finding ourself. We are still discovering who we are as a congregation. And I suggest we consider the wisdom of Draymond Green.

Because instead of trying to recreate what we had in the past, perhaps our identity will be defined in part by what our community needs. Like Green, we can become

whatever we need to be. We can use the needs of people inside and outside our congregation to at least in part help us decide who we are, and who we need to be. Are we willing to imagine our congregation as - in a small way at least - whoever it needs to be in Thorncliffe Park and Don Mills neighbourhoods in 2024?

We just need to all put our hands in - and create the church that we want to be.

I cannot think of the story of Jesus clearing the temple without thinking of Anne Murray. And her 1970 song, "Put Your Hand in the Hand". She sang, "Every time I look into the holy book, I want to tremble. When I read about the part where a carpenter cleared the temple. For the buyers and the sellers were no different fellows than what I profess to be. And it causes me shame to know I'm not the gal that I should be. ... Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently, by putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee." Let's all put our hand in.

We are lost in the middle of Lent. Being lost might sound like a bad thing. But realizing that you are lost is a blessing. Lent is only half over after all. To mis-quote Red Green, we are half way through Lent. If you think you've blown it, remember you've only half-blown it. Now get out there and finish the job.

As we continue our journey through Lent, I encourage us all to "Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently, by putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee".

Amen.