

Lent 3B 03 March 2024
John 2:13-22
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true God, now and forever. Amen.

The Jews then said to [Jesus], 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Let's pray: ...

I'm always wary of people who say, "I have a message or a prophecy or an instruction from God about this, that, or the other." In most cases, it creates a situation whereby they set themselves above others, and rather than "speaking into" someone's life, they speak down at them from on high. Whether or not they're aware of it, they're attempting to set God aside and assume his throne. It seems that those to whom God has "put something on their heart", try to exercise some kind of spiritual dominance over others.

The thing to keep in mind here, is that this is exactly the opposite of what Jesus himself did. Reading from [Philippians 2:6-8] we hear that Jesus himself, the one person in history who could legitimately do that, didn't consider equality with God as something to be exploited but humbled himself to the point of death even death on a cross.

Keeping this in mind, let's look closely at what's going on in today's Gospel.

The religious leaders challenge Jesus with, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" First, we need to work out what "this" is that they're talking about. From the beginning of today's reading, [John 2:13], we discover that it starts with Jesus wandering up to Jerusalem.

So, the God whom some portray as an ogre who operates by dominating others, enters the holy city of Jerusalem in a royal procession, not on a velvet covered litter carried by slaves, but on the back of a donkey. He's not followed by the aristocracy and religiously important people, there's no red carpet rolled out; rather, he's followed by the great unwashed masses; the lame, the broken, the poor. The Jesus we know, love, and worship, doesn't exactly fit the bill of a God who encourages us to spiritually dominate others.

Jesus gathered to himself all those considered riff-raff, all who had been dominated and kept away. Then he entered the temple with them; the very centre of Judaism itself, the place where the broken, the lame, the blind, the unloved, the oppressed, and the religiously “other” people weren’t allowed to enter. He went into the temple and he overturned the tables and chairs of the merchants and moneychangers as a sign that God doesn’t require an entry fee to gain an audience with him. (Incidentally, this is an extremely inconvenient reading to come up when I want to earbash you about giving more money to the church because it’s God-pleasing).

When Jesus tore through the temple like a bull-in-a-china-shop, he signalled that the tide of change had arrived. The letter of the Law would give way to the law of love. The velvet ropes fell to the ground, the ushers were dismissed, and all were welcomed. In came the lame, the lost, the lonely, the last, and the least. And if that’s not bad enough, close on their grubby heels were the ankle-biters. Those repulsive, grotty, screaming toddlers.

The religious authorities were not amused. So, they came to Jesus and said, “by what authority do you take down these barriers?”

I suspect that the reason the religious leaders were so hostile, was because this disagreeable mass of humanity presented to them a painful reminder of the parts of themselves, they wish didn’t exist. And then Jesus comes along and exposes their fragility.

By what authority do you do this Jesus? Jesus responds by showing them that they were looking for God’s authority in all the wrong places. God’s power doesn’t exist in false notions of human power and purity codes and human constructs you’ve set up for yourselves to block out the things which you hate about yourself.

And can you imagine their horror when Jesus tells them who the people are who totally get it? Tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, and all who’ve been excluded, all who know only too well the depth of human failings. Those of us who struggle to function, can’t manage to walk on our own, or can’t manage without a Webster pack. These are the ones who acutely understand Jesus’ real authority.

The fallacy then, and it still exists today, is that there're insiders and outsiders and that we get to be on the inside. But the good news heralded in by Jesus then, and the reality today, is that there're no longer outsiders.

There's no "them" and "us". There's only "us".

At this point, I must confess that this lesson irritates me. It reminds me that despite my commitment to an open door and a shared table, I still fall into the them and us trap. I think of those who say, "God just put it on my heart to stand over you and speak into your life" as "them"; I think of woke agenda activists as "them"; I think of people who go bonkers over Taylor Swift as "them".

I am, of course, wrong. The Gospel is only good news if it's good news for everybody. St Paul says, "And he died for all" (2 Corinthians 5:15) and Jesus himself proclaims, "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. It's God who searches the heart; not me. And the sinner in me finds that hard to take.

Yet, it really is good news that there's no room to boast. What I'm saying is that all of our attempts to put ourselves in the place of God are thwarted because we get the place of God wrong. If we think that "the place" of God is one of domination and division, then we haven't been paying attention.

Which takes us back to Christ's authority and the cross. Because Jesus himself, the one person in history who could legitimately pull off standing above everyone else, did so, but when he was above us all, it was hanging from a cross that we prepared for him. He didn't consider equality with God as something to be exploited but humbled himself to the point of death even death on a cross.

The very idea that there's such a thing as "them" and "us" is bunkum, because Christ has made it so. God has broken down all of the barriers that create divisions among people and destroyed them by willingly taking all that sin into himself in Jesus' death on the cross and then defeating it all, through the glory of his resurrection.

So, at the times when I'm feeling particularly filled with self-righteous indignation and feelings of "us" and "them"; when I arrogantly think I stand above and feel spiritually superior to others, who, unlike me, are clearly not taking the high road, I'm glad that Jesus answers my question, "What sign can you show me for doing this?" by etching his cross into my heart, mind, and soul.

Honestly, saints, trying to play humanity's misguided version of God is simply a foolish and exhausting pursuit. I'm grateful to be able to come to this table of God's grace week after week, where there's an open invitation, there're no security guards, there's no them, only us, there's a place for everyone, and I know that it's Jesus and not me who's made it so.

What was true then is still true today. Jesus still calls the tax collectors and prostitutes and Adelaide City Council parking inspectors and Pharisees; women, men, and children from all walks of life, into the very heart of God. So, please come and join me at his table, at this holy of holies, not because you've slipped past the velvet ropes and the heavies on the door, but because the ground at the foot of the cross is level, there's room for us all, and Jesus openly invites into the mystery of his love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.