

3 Lent – Year B – March 15, 2009
Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22
Susan E. Wilmot

From the world of progressive rock music, Pink Floyd's album *The Wall* hit popular senses and sensibilities like a brick. In this powerful story, a greater consciousness was born of the tragedy of misunderstanding and abuse that frequently accompanies those who suffer from mental illness. It is often hard for those who have the signs of mental illness to seek the help they need. It is equally hard for those who see the signs to understand what is manifest as odd or frightening behavior. The chemical imbalances in the brain that lead to the changes in our loved ones also have a profound external effect. It is truly as if this hidden disease puts up a barrier that blocks coherent communication and builds a wall of isolation. However much we want to believe and practice the kind of diversity that enriches us all; if we're honest, the reality is frequently different. Differences very often make us deeply uneasy, everything from unexpected or unusual behaviors, to differences in our sexuality. Or what about political polemics, and even little things like accents or idioms that prompt teasing and jokes, because we don't quite know how to respond with grace or compassion.

Even within the canon of Scripture, Biblical scholars as well as the rest of us know that the Gospel of John is different from the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The signs are all there, including stories that no other evangelist tells. For ones that are shared, like the cleansing of the Temple from today's reading, the story may have a new emphasis or timing from the three other accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. What is missing from John's account is as interesting as what is included. In the synoptic telling of this story, Jesus condemns the money changers with the words from the prophet Jeremiah, "but you have made it a den of robbers." The implication being that Jesus is protesting the financial exploitation of those who come to make sacrifice at the Temple. In Mark, Jesus uses Isaiah's words, in proclaiming that the Temple shall be a "house of prayer for all the nations." The inference is that Jesus was also furious that the Gentiles had no place to come and worship God because the outer courtyards assigned for Gentiles to pray in had been turned into a marketplace. In all of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple comes with his visit to Jerusalem for the final Passover before his crucifixion, not so in John.

There are several differences in John's account that make us pay attention, and make this reading especially appropriate for Lent, where we are being more intentional about our reading of Scripture. John tells us about three different visits by Jesus to Jerusalem. This reading is the first visit, and Jesus is in Jerusalem with all the faithful and pious Judeans to offer sacrifice and worship at the Temple. In the overall story of Jesus' ministry, this part of John's narrative is preceded most immediately by the first of His signs that occurred at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. That sign -- changing water into wine -- "revealed his glory". That is the glory of the Word made flesh. You and I must therefore see and hear the story of the cleansing of the Temple with an eye for the sign that Jesus is showing us, and ear for what Jesus is telling us about Himself as the Messiah. More than that, we too are invited to make our own response to Jesus' self-revelation.

"Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" says Jesus. More literally, stop making my Father's house a house of trade. Whose house? In the other Gospels the quote is taken directly from the Hebrew Scriptures as though God were speaking, "My house shall be a house of prayer." In John, Jesus is speaking, and he calls the Temple, my Father's house. Then there is an insert about what the disciples remember later -- a quotation from the Messianic Psalm 69. In real time, the action moves from Jesus' words to the response by the leaders of the Temple. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" It is our turn to stop now because this is a pivotal moment in the dialogue. Jesus is full of righteous anger and has scattered the money changers and their goods. The Temple leaders have come running to see what the commotion is all about. The natural response that you or I might have

expected would have been something like, “what do you think you’re doing?” Or maybe even, “that man’s crazy!” At first glance, it seems odd that the leaders say, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Their question is at once an acknowledgement of Jesus’ visible Messianic deed, and an indictment of themselves for allowing something as ungodly as profiteering to go on in the Temple courts. Jesus’ restoration of the Temple as a place of prayer is not condemned. Yet, we have to think that the Temple leaders were responding mostly to Jesus’ claim of equality with God, when he speaks of the Temple as my Father’s house. In other words, what the Jerusalem leaders are doing is testing a Messianic claim in a time-honored way by asking for a sign. In their interpretation of the Torah and the prophets, it was understood that the coming of the Messiah would be accompanied by signs from God that substantiated the Messianic claim.

Jesus does not answer them by giving them the sign they demand. After all is said and done, as the Word made flesh, God incarnate, Jesus IS the sign, and all that He is and does IS the only sign that anyone needs. The final proof is the sign that Jesus consistently points towards, His glorious resurrection. After the fact, the disciples understand this and state it explicitly as one of the reasons that they have faith in Jesus and believe the Scriptures. In the heat of the moment, the Judean leaders become obtuse. Where a moment ago they see and hear a Messianic claim in simple words, they now misunderstand Jesus and mock his meaning by taking his words literally. Is it fear that blocks their understanding? Is it pride in their knowledge and position as teachers and leaders of Israel? Or is it a kind of idolatry – where their pride in the stones of the Temple is actually getting between them and their worship of God. I’m sure as we pray about the reading this week, God will reveal other possibilities that are important in our own spiritual journeys. In the meantime, this swift descent to mundane literalism gives us another pause for thought. How often have I misunderstood another, because of fear or pride? What about you?

Jesus’ riddle is misunderstood. He is not talking about rebuilding the walls of the Temple in Jerusalem, but about His resurrection. There will be a new Temple on earth, not of stones, but of flesh and blood. In God’s gracious provision for the sins of the world, the Lamb of God gives Himself for the life of the world. The sign of His resurrection is the sign of God’s glorious victory over sin and death. The tearing down of the worldly Temple, and the raising up of a new Temple in Jesus, our Lord and Savior, frees all believers to worship God in Spirit and in Truth. That is to worship God in the person of Jesus. What Jesus came to show us all is that worship is not about a place, it is about a person, and our relationships; our relationship with God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and our relationships with one another in the community of Christ’s Body.

In so many ways, Jesus IS the sign that breaks down the walls that divide: those that separate communities of believers, and those that separate us from worshipping God, and building relationships with one another. Yet Jesus doesn’t march in pushing over walls with physical force. He simply speaks the truth in love; listens with compassion; heals with grace; and gives of Himself in humble service. What if this season of Lent is different from all others and something new is happening here? What if God is transforming each of us in these same ways? What if He is calling us to break loose from our own fears or pride, so that you and I can truly lose ourselves for the sake of the Gospel? What if God is calling you and me to tear down a wall within ourselves that is a barrier to worship, and to free the Holy Spirit to cleanse, to heal, to guide each of us into a deeper awareness of the mystery of God’s love and grace? How will that change us, and our relationships? How will the sign of God’s gracious gifts in us make a difference in the world, to the glory of His name?

Amen.