

*Exodus 20: 1 - 17*

*Psalm 19*

Year B, Lent III

*1 Corinthians 1: 18 - 25*

*John 2: 13 - 22*

March 15, 2009

### *What Really Matters*

What really matters? The question is basic but every generation of Christians must answer it from time to time. What really matters- in our life and our faith? For the church universal, the question is coming to the forefront. Many are claiming that we are entering a time of immense challenge and change for the church. The Right Reverend Mark Dyer, a professor of mine at Virginia Theological Seminary, has noted, "Every five hundred years or so, the church has a rummage sale." Phyllis Tickle has called this moment the Great Emergence. The Bible and Biscuit group are reading her book of the same title. She has quoted Bishop Dyer and wryly noted that we have taken out the ad in the classifieds and the sale is ongoing.<sup>1</sup> The idea for both of these scholars is that we begin to look around and try to decide what really matters and what should we remove. 500 years ago was the Protestant Reformation where many Christians decided they no longer needed a Pope or Latin or twenty altars in a church or indulgences for sins. Five hundred years prior to that we had a split with the Eastern Orthodox Church where folks decided we no longer wanted or needed icons or Greek. Five hundred years prior to that was the fall of Rome and the creation of the Papacy as a means to preserve society and the church. And yes, five hundred years previous to that moment, Jesus was making his proclamations about what really matters in our worship. So, the question again falls to us as faithful Christians, "What really matters?"

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<sup>1</sup> This overview comes from the Reverend Steve Pankey's blog "Draught-ing Theology" (what a great name for a blog!) <http://spankeysblog.blogspot.com/>

Jesus is making a bold and revolutionary proclamation around this very question. We have all heard the story of overturning the moneychangers before today. However, we typically hear this story in relation to the last week of Jesus' life. For the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus' decision to attack the worship structure of the Temple provokes those in charge to kill him. Since we have heard the story so many times, we can find it difficult to understand the trauma of such an event. Imagine if someone entered our little sanctuary, flipped over the altar, threw the bread and wine out the door into the street, and proclaimed that we were all gluttons and drunkards. Imagine for just a fraction of a second how angry you would be, how convinced you might also be that the person doing it was insane, and how very surreal and hurtful the whole experience might be. Jesus' actions drew just such a reaction. Centuries of interpretation have pointed to the idea of corrupt moneychangers and shady dealings with animal sellers. The text does not give us this easy out. After all, if these merchants were fleecing the community and known to do so, then Jesus would have been heralded as a true prophet. No. We have to deal with something much more difficult.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' public ministry BEGINS with this story. His mom asks him to turn some water to wine and then he goes to the Temple for the holiest feast of the year, Passover. In that context, Jesus effectively starts his ministry among the people of Israel by literally overturning everything that they understood and knew about God to that point. For the Gospel of John, the overturning of the moneychangers is not the reason for Christ's crucifixion. Instead, this moment becomes the opening speech, the beginning salvo, or even the startling touchstone of Jesus' ministry. Jesus speaks with a candor that outraged the people of the era. He demanded a deeper level of worship and honesty with God.

We can have a hard time with this level of honesty. For most of us, the church is the last place we want to have such a searing, no holds barred discussion. We want to keep things on a polite, kind level. Yet, we are called to speak the truth. It reminds me of a story about a woman in a small town. In a trial, a Southern small-town prosecuting attorney called his first witness, a grandmotherly, elderly woman to the stand. He approached her and asked, "Mrs. Jones, do you know me?" She responded, "Why yes, I know you, Mr. Williams. I've known you since you were a boy, and, frankly, you've been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you're a big shot when you haven't the brains to realize you'll never amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, "I know you." The lawyer was stunned.

Not knowing what else to do, he pointed across the room and asked, "Mrs. Jones, do you know the defense attorney?" She again replied, "Why, yes, I do. I've known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. He's lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem. He can't build a normal relationship with anyone, and his law practice is one of the worst in the entire state. Not to mention he cheated on his wife with three different women. Yes, I know him." The defense attorney nearly died. The judge asked both counselors to approach the bench and, in a very quiet voice said, "If either of you idiots ask her if she knows me, I'll send you both to the electric chair!"

The story is funny because of the unflinching honesty of the old woman. I would guess that many of us would love to be that unafraid in our speech in regular life. The funny thing is that this woman alone in the room is ready to hear the gospel. Jesus is equally calling us to look at our lives and our churches and our worship and ask that critical questions, "What really matters?"

The second half of the story in the gospel is often overlooked. We are so busy hoping to find a comment about corrupt business practice that we miss the whole point. Jesus has come to raise up a new Temple. He is not simply overturning the old ways. He is blazing and proclaiming a new path, a new way. Access to God will no longer be something you must buy and sell but something that can happen anywhere, anytime. The Gospel of John is proclaiming clearly what really matters is Jesus. He is God's new Way. All of the trappings and beauty of the Temple are not nearly as important as Jesus himself, present in the flesh.

So, we come full circle to the comments of Bishop Dyer and Phyllis Tickle. What really matters? In this midst of a time where we can look around and question the importance of robes and crosses and altar rails and pulpits and everything in between, what matters? The answer for us is the same as it was when Jesus was throwing around furniture. Nothing in this space is as important as God. Nothing we own or plan to build or could ever hope to create is as important as God. Jesus has given us the answer to the question, yet every year and in every generation, we must ask the question again and answer it with a searing, painful honesty, "What really matters?"