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St. James', Mt. Airy  
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Lent 3B  
Exodus 20:1-17  
Psalm 19  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
John 2:13-22

*Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord,  
our strength and our redeemer.*

Whenever I read today's passage from any of the Gospels, I think about the classic movie *Cool Hand Luke*. How many of you know this 1967 gem which starred Paul Newman? If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it – especially if you sit down to watch it while keeping the Jesus story at the front of your mind.

I don't want to spoil it for you, so I'm not going to go into all the cross-overs of imagery to be found in the movie (and if you've seen the movie and don't know what I'm talking about then it's time to view it again!), but the film, set in the 1950's, opens with decorated Korean War veteran Lucas "Luke" Jackson (played by Newman) cutting the heads off of parking meters one drunken night. He is subsequently sentenced to two years in prison and sent to a Florida chain gang prison where he refuses to submit to the system, and ultimately pays the price with his life.

That opening sequence has been seen as a modern day turning of the tables, a condemnation of a morally bankrupt society with every heavy, jangly, thump seen and heard as the tops of the parking meters are lopped off.

Certainly a different scene and sound than the commotion Jesus caused when he drove out the sheep and the cattle with a whip of cords, and overturned the tables of the money changers – but alike in its condemnation of a system that appeared to fulfill its **function**, but had forgotten its **purpose**.<sup>1</sup>

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So a bit of background in case you're wondering what all the fuss was about for Jesus in the first place.

Yearly, pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem, and to the Temple, in the lead up to Passover. In order to make a sacrifice, you needed to have an unblemished animal. Who could make the journey to Jerusalem with an animal and keep it unblemished? As such, a marketplace for purchasing such sacrificial animals grew up on site.

In addition to making a sacrifice, pilgrims needed to pay the temple tax. Now, you could not use regular money – which bore the image of the emperor on it – to pay such a tax. And so, there were always on hand money changers who would exchange Roman coins for imageless coins acceptable for religious use.

This all makes sense. It seems to be a system that helps people fulfill their religious obligations, yes?

Now here is the interesting part – because each of the Gospels frames it slightly differently as to WHY Jesus is upset.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Hulitt Gloer, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*.

Here in John we are told Jesus exclaimed, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” Followed by the direction that “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

This is an allusion to Zechariah 14:21 which states, “There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts *on that day*,” that is, on the day when the Lord comes to Jerusalem. Jesus’ actions indicate that the Lord has come, and the traders must leave.<sup>2</sup>

So, it is not an injunction against buying and selling animals, per se; or against the supposed practice of the money changers raking an unfair profit; neither is it a condemnation of taking over the Court of the Gentiles – the one place non-Jews could come and pray – and turning it into an open-air market.

No, here in John – in which this story is his first public act – Jesus is revealing a new thing. That thing, is that the old ways of worshiping and knowing God are passing away.

God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24) – and the temple of Jesus’ body is now where the spirit and truth of God are found (John 17:21).

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Whew. Okay. Contextual history lesson complete... What do we do with all that?

If last week’s Gospel from Mark focused us on the Lenten question of “What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?” then today’s Gospel leads us to ask the question, “What does it mean to be the church of Jesus?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, Exegetical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*.

<sup>3</sup> W. Hulitt Gloer, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*.

And that takes us back to the cleansing of the Temple. Upon entering the Temple Jesus discovered how deceiving appearances can be. While the place appeared to fulfill its **function**, closer inspection revealed it had forgotten its **purpose**. The trappings were still in place, but the place had no heart for its *raison d'être*<sup>4</sup> – to come closer to God.

### **Function, purpose, heart.**

These are the things I think we're called to meditate upon as a community. It is a part of maintaining a vital community to periodically look within and make course corrections as needed to avoid sliding into stagnation or decline.

This work of the life-cycle of congregations is something the Vestry has looked at before, and that we circled back to briefly at our recent retreat. Knowing who we are is how we plan for everything.

Last year we put on hold the work of discerning a vision statement at St. James'. Whether we return to a full-on visioning process or engage in another form of reflection and engagement with core values – I believe this work will be essential to the growth of our community in the next decade.

So, I offer you this question today: *In what ways is St. James' fulfilling its **function**, and in what ways has it forgotten its **purpose**?*

It's not an easy thing to answer. One way to enter into this reflection, however, is to seek the **heart** of this community, to look again at our core values, to discern what about the story we tell of who we are reflects who we have been, and what parts are still aspirational for who we want to be.

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<sup>4</sup> W. Hulitt Gloer, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*.

In this Lenten season, as we contemplate once again the story of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, I invite you to pray about our journey with God as a community.

What are the structures or parts of life lived together that keep things **functioning** and moving, but which subtly or blatantly weaken spiritual growth and relationship?

What is your part in the renewal of **purpose** here and now?

What tables do we need to turn to come closer to God?

~ AMEN ~