

Lent Three - B- 3/15/09
St. David's

It's been nine months now since our gorgeous sanctuary was completed. That means that I have walked outside from the offices and viewed our sacred space approximately 800 times. Still, the glow has not yet worn off. Every time I see it, I still feel strangely warmed, as John Wesley put it. Of course, there are many emotions tied up in that warmth. For one, it is impossible for me to not see this structure as a symbol of all of you and all that you have done to live into the St. David's mission. It is impossible to not see this building as tangible evidence of what we have become.

I am also overwhelmed by the thought process that went into every inch of this edifice, and the great job your building committee did in creating a space that symbolizes who we are as a community. All those emotional triggers kick in for me as soon as I step outside and see the courtyard, the magnificent sculpture and fountains, with the blue stream leading into the narthex fountain and our baptismal font.

It does make me think of baptism every day, just as your building committee intended. But in addition to the beauty of the copper structures, the sense of flowing water in the desert, and the reminder of our Baptismal covenant, I also have the advantage of being warmed as I think about the man who built those sculptures.

Jean and I have known and admired Mike Dumas and his wife Julie for over 15 years. They are salt of the earth people, people who connect themselves to and honor God by making beautiful objects with their hands. They are gentle folk who have suffered life's greatest tragedies and come out the other side.

The day I met Mike and Julie was the worst day of their life. Their quiet teenage

son Casey had just been killed in a rollover traffic accident on I-15. A few days later, I, along with hundreds of others, was attending his funeral. Though I was certain that the overwhelming emotion I would feel that day would be an intense grief, I was wrong. The Presider at that service changed all that. I sat there dumbfounded and incredulous as I listened to that preacher explain to us why Casey had been killed. "Our God", he said, "demands our allegiance. If any of us do not accept Jesus as our lord and savior, there are consequences. When we sin, God demands sacrifice." He then quoted today's first reading, telling us that God punishes children for the iniquity of their parents. He went on to explain that the sins of humanity killed Jesus, that someone had to die for what we did wrong. The same is true, he said, of Casey.

The good news, as he put it, was that "Casey's sacrifice was an atonement for the sins of others, including his family. In this way, they and us can be saved."

I will admit to you that I was filled with so much anger that morning it was all I could do to get through the service. I had to stay to support Mike and Julie and because I was involved in doing the grave side service. But what I wanted to do was walk right up to that minister in the middle of the homily and bind and gag him. I have watched people get hurt by representatives of the church in many fashions. This, however, was way beyond unconscionable.

I spent years consoling Mike and Julie after that hideous event and we became close friends. I had an opportunity to do so because after that day, they stopped going to the church of that preacher and started coming to Grace Church. It was also that day that I decided that I would personally do something to end such abuse by the church. It

was a motivating factor for me becoming a priest.

Today's Gospel is always cathartic for me because it reminds us that there really is such a thing as righteous anger. Jesus often responds with indignation when the power brokers of his society take advantage of the already disadvantaged. He also gets quite perturbed when the culture creates a system of injustice and suffering for so many people. But today, he is far beyond indignation and agitation. He positively blows a gasket when it is not the Roman authorities or secular influences inflicting pain and suffering on people, but instead his own religion.

There have been any number of possible explanations for why Jesus is overcome with anger today. Some scholars suggest that this is all about consumerism, that Jesus is torked because so many financial transactions are taking place inside the walls of the temple, a sacred space where such activities should not happen. I do not think there is any doubt that Jesus is put off by the capitalistic activities happening in his faith's central place of worship. But the problem with this explanation is that the vendors selling animals and exchanging money are offering pilgrims an important service in the religious system of the day. Carrying an unblemished animal across the desert to sacrifice at the temple was pretty near impossible. We know that Jesus's own parents bought a dove at the temple when Jesus was a teenager. Moneychangers were also important, because you could not use a coin with an image on it to pay alms inside the temple itself. Remember the whole discussion about the image of Caesar on Roman coins that we hear elsewhere in the Gospels.

Other scholars have suggested that Jesus is attacking a religious system that has

created a hierarchical staircase between regular people and God. The whole idea that the only way the person on the street could make contact with God was through the actions of a person in the priestly class was certainly also off-putting to Jesus. It was this priestly class after all, that created the exchange system in the outer temple area. If this is the case, it is not so much the vendors that Jesus is upset with, but rather the temple system that makes their presence necessary. In such an understanding, Jesus is attacking his own religion's system that has excluded people by creating a class or caste system.

Finally, others have suggested that what steams Jesus the most is that the priestly class of the temple has created a system that takes financial advantage of the people who can least afford it. After all, this system of forcing the poor to buy animals so that they could rightly worship in the temple is exploitation of the people Jesus has spent his career defending.

I believe that all of these factors contributed to Jesus losing his temper this morning. But I am also convinced that there was an even more compelling reason for Jesus's anger. Perhaps I have been overly influenced by my own past, but I would argue that the central reason he was so upset was the same thing that set me off at Casey Dumas's funeral 15 years ago. I believe that what Jesus is doing today is symbolically attacking the entire sacrificial system of Judaism. I believe Jesus had come to the conclusion that this whole notion of killing an animal to appease God for our sins was not only barbaric, but theologically bankrupt and had nothing to do with the way he had experienced God. I do not think that Jesus is cleansing the temple today, as we

have so often antiseptically referred to this Gospel, but I believe he is ending it. He is symbolically destroying the temple system that allowed people, poor people, to make blood sacrifices to atone for their sins. That is why Jesus prophesies today the Temple's destruction. He wants the whole bloody practice gone.

Over the years, I have become convinced that this was Jesus's intention for all kinds of reasons. First, never once do we hear anywhere in the Gospels of Jesus participating in a blood sacrifice, even though this was expected of all Jews. Second, Jesus constantly tells us of a God who demands not blood, but justice. Even at the end of his earthly ministry when Peter draws the blood of one who comes to arrest Jesus, he rebukes Peter for taking this action, telling him to put away sword. Third, Jesus begins his ministry by quoting Isaiah, and goes on to quote him many more times. Isaiah is the prophet who said things like this: *"Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever presents a grain offering, like one who offers swine's blood; ...these have chosen their own ways, and in their abomination they take delight."* Fourth, Jesus clearly states in the Gospel of Matthew the following to his disciples. "Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Finally, on the night before he was to die, Jesus chose once again to not honor the Jewish practice of sacrifice, but instead to lift up the Seder, the memorial meal. He tells the disciples and us that when we worship we are to gather the community and not sacrifice an animal, but to have a meal together in remembrance of him. He replaces once and for all the idea of a flesh and blood sacrifice, asking us and showing us that we

are to substitute bread for flesh and wine for blood. No more sacrifice. No more scapegoat for our sins. I do not believe there is any doubt that Jesus's anger today is concentrated on his religious system when it suggests that God wants blood, when Jesus knows full well that what God really demands is justice.

All of us here are very familiar with the quote from the prophet Amos that hangs on the banner at the end of our building. But it is good for us to be reminded what God says two verses earlier in that quotation. "Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Not blood, not sacrifice, but justice.

Today is the only day recorded in the Gospels where Jesus gets angry enough to throw stuff. He does so in protest of a theology of substitutionary atonement, the idea that through a blood sacrifice, we can atone for our own sins. You would think that at least for Christians, that would be the end of that. But as we all know, years after Jesus would be killed by Roman authorities for standing up for the rights of the powerless, the whole idea of substitutionary atonement that Jesus fought so hard to stop, would rear its ugly head again.

The first inkling of its return is found in Paul's Epistles. Paul never actually develops a sacrificial or an atonement theology. But in First Corinthians, he does speak of peace being made through "the blood of his cross" and that people are redeemed by means of Christ's death and resurrection. The author of Hebrews makes constant use of sacrificial language also. In the second century, a small number of theologians would

expand Paul's idea, suggesting that Jesus's death was in some way a sacrifice for all of our sins. Origen, for example, would say that the death of Christ was a ransom paid to Satan. But in the 11th century, a gentlemen named Anselm made another leap in atonement theology. He would say that sin, being an infinite offense against God, required a "satisfaction" equally infinite. As no finite being could offer such satisfaction, it was necessary that God would have to do this. And from there, it was just a short hop to the notion that God sent his only son to earth just so he could be killed as a sacrifice in atonement for my sins.

Perhaps I, and many of you, are taken aback by a Preacher who could be callous enough to tell parents who had just lost their child that it was their fault he was killed and that he died as a sacrifice for their sins. But the truth is, he didn't make this stuff up. Substitutionary atonement theology is not only still with us, it permeates every aspect of our tradition. It is embedded in our liturgies, our Eucharistic prayers, our collects, our blessings, everywhere. It is even more prevalent in our hymns. Here at St. David's, you rarely hear such language, because we work so hard to replace it with justice language, as I believe Jesus taught. But it is so omnipresent, that occasionally it still slips in. Mary McDonald, for example, could not find four hymns suggested for this week's readings that did not contain atonement, blood or sacrificial lyrics. She had to choose her own hymns to match today's liturgy. As long as this blood atonement language remains a part of the church, we continue to create an atmosphere where it is possible for the church to do more damage to people like Mike and Julie Dumas than good. In addition, as long as we continue to keep it in our worship, even in the most banal form, we are

acting as if Jesus's rage against the machine never happened.

Our God does not ask us to sacrifice others but rather to feed them, to heal them and to serve them. There is a funny thing about that word service in Hebrew. The word found in our first reading of the Ten Commandments for serve is *abodah*. Then, when we get to the Commandment about worship, guess what the word is in Hebrew? Yep, *abodah*. **The word for the act of worship for Jews is the same as the word for serving others and bringing them to some measure of equality. That's what God did for the Jews in the Exodus. That's what we are to thankfully do for others as expressed in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are not supposed to be our guide book to what we do to reach salvation. They are our grateful response to the freedom that God gives us.**

The time has come for all of us to follow Jesus's lead. We need to stand up in righteous anger against this archaic theology that Jesus rejected so vehemently today. The time has come for us to turn over the tables of any religious organization that continues, however innocently, to justify a theology that suggests that God, or people, or animals need to be sacrificed to atone for our sinful ways. The time has come for each of us to do all in our power to prevent any other couple from facing the pain and suffering inflicted on Julie and Mike Dumas by a church.

Let us return to the church of *abodah*. Like Jesus, let us not just cleanse our churches, but end every practice in them that could ever hurt, disenfranchise or

subjugate another person. Let us build lives and churches of service to others. Let us hear again and live again the words of another prophet, the prophet Micah, who knew what God has always asked of us, that we do justice, we love mercy, and we walk humbly with our God. Amen.