

Lent 3B (3/4/2018)
 Exodus 20:1-17
 Psalm 19
 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

In spite of Jesus' outburst in the temple, the sacrificial system is still intact. Our sacrificial transactions aren't necessarily religious; nevertheless they serve to uphold the order of things at the expense of sacrificial victims. But, Jesus subverts the system, shifting the locus of sacrifice to himself. And, by his sacrificial love, he redefines our own sacrifices for the sake of life.

Isn't it nice when Jesus confronts someone other than us?¹ When we hear the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, or challenging the Pharisees, or facing off with Pontius Pilate, we can just sit back and cheer him on. First-century religious and political dynamics are mostly foreign to us, so the Jerusalem temple system, the religious elite, and the Roman authorities are easy targets. Not to mention, we already know how the conflicts play out; Jesus quite literally rises above the fray, demonstrating his final authority by overcoming his own death at the hands of his opponents. It's like watching the recording of a sporting event you know your team has already won. There's no risk, no personal investment in any particular phase of the game.

But, it's dangerous to detach ourselves from Jesus' conflicts in the gospel story. In an effort to uphold the portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of John, for instance, Christians have often fallen into the trap of denigrating Judaism, and by extension, Jewish people. According to the old interpretation, "the Jews," as John calls Jesus' opponents, are rigid legalists, prioritizing the minutiae of religious observance at the expense of true faith. This flat characterization, however, obscures the fact that

¹ See Paul C. Shupe, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 96.

Jesus and the disciples are themselves Jewish, and Jesus never claims to nullify the covenant God makes with Israel, but rather to embody it. Nevertheless, the conventional reading has fueled anti-Jewish sentiment for centuries, propping up persecution Jesus never intended.

As long as we observe Jesus' conflicts from a distance, the gospel story poses no challenge to us. **As soon as we are willing to see ourselves in the place of those whom Jesus confronts, however, the gospel wields transformative power.**

As a case study, consider the temple system. First-century Jewish pilgrims centered their experience with God in a single location, often traveling long distances to worship at the Jerusalem temple on holy days. Standard procedure was to exchange Roman coins, bearing the image of the emperor, for currency that was ritually acceptable so that pilgrims could purchase animals to offer as sacrifice. The synoptic Gospels – Mark, Matthew, and Luke – suggest that money changers had corrupted the sacrificial system by gouging worshipers with unfavorable exchange rates: “You have made [God’s house] a den of robbers,” Jesus alleges, for instance, in Mark.² But in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes no such accusation. Instead, he indicts the entire system: “Take these things out of here!” he shouts, spilling coins and chasing out animals, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

Of course! we might think to ourselves, *Why would you dishonor a holy place with such a worldly enterprise?* But, rather than look down our noses at the wide-eyed money changers and livestock sellers, can we put ourselves in their shoes? There’s no indication that these businesspeople are taking advantage of anyone. All the good religious people involved in the temple system had done, in the words of

² 11:17.

one interpreter, was to “[settle] into comfortable behaviors that enabled them to meet institutional goals.”³ In other words, it was simply assumed that the religious institution would sustain itself by means of the established sacrificial system.

And, aren’t we familiar with such an arrangement? **In spite of Jesus’ outburst in the temple so many centuries ago, the system is still intact. Our sacrificial transactions aren’t necessarily religious; nevertheless they serve to uphold the order of things at the expense of sacrificial victims.** We sacrifice low-wage workers so that we can have access to cheaper products. We sacrifice refugees and migrants in the name of national security and prosperity. We sacrifice the self-esteem of young women in order to uphold an impossible standard of beauty. We sacrifice ourselves in codependent relationships. These and countless other sacrifices, seen and unseen, structure our everyday lives. Like the participants in the Jerusalem temple system, we’ve simply settled into comfortable, widely accepted patterns of sacrifice, generally ignoring their impact.

But Jesus, wielding a whip of prophetic indignation, subverts the system, confronting the ways our patterns violate God’s purposes. Whenever we tolerate harmful sacrifices, he indicts us, drawing our attention again to the poor, the captive, the vulnerable among us.

What’s more, he shifts the locus of sacrifice to his own body, allowing the curse of the victim to fall on him. “No one has greater love than this,” he explains to his followers prior to his crucifixion, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”⁴ **Jesus’ sacrifice, freely given, costs him everything, yet it represents the way to**

³ Shupe 94.

⁴ John 15:13.

abundant life, both for him and for us. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” he promises. This is the mysterious wisdom of the cross.

In light of this wisdom, then, the question emerges: What makes for meaningful sacrifice? During World War II, Emery Andrews served as the English language pastor at Japanese Baptist Church in Seattle. Pursuant to Executive Order 9066, the members of his congregation, citizens and other residents of Japanese descent, were incarcerated at the Puyallup Assembly Center, also known as Camp Harmony. Since they could no longer gather as church in Seattle, Andrews traveled almost daily to and from the internment camp in order to serve them. Later, when his congregants were transferred to the more permanent internment camp in Minidoka, Idaho, Andrews and his family went with them, relocating to nearby Twin Falls. And, while ministering there, Andrews let out spare rooms in the family’s house to accommodate Japanese American soldiers visiting their incarcerated families. The Andrews family remained in Idaho through the end of the war.⁵

That’s a meaningful sacrifice. Costly, yet freely given, the sacrifice of the Andrews family identifies them with those who had sacrifice thrust upon them. **Such a sacrifice takes the shape of the cross, situating the disciple of Jesus alongside the suffering world he loves. Yet, the cross is not the end of the story. God vindicates meaningful sacrifices, redeeming every deathly circumstance according to the promise of resurrection. And thus, by his sacrificial love, Jesus redefines our own sacrifices for the sake of life.**

⁵ [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Emery Andrews/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Emery_Andrews/).