

Last week I suggested that Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness was spent asking himself, what it means to be Jesus. And, then we addressed the question, "What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ." If we accept this premise, then today's question is "What does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ?" [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, p. 69]

You may recall that the passage immediately before today's text, is the familiar story of the wedding at Cana. Jesus famously changes water into wine at this private Galilean celebration, conducting his first miracle, or as John calls them, his first sign, and revealing Jesus' glory, at least to his disciples, and, perhaps, to the wine steward.

That brings us to today's text from John. Passover is near. The community's hearts and minds are remembering the Exodus, their liberation by God from slavery in Egypt, as well as their freedom as a nation under the leadership of Moses. Jesus is a faithful Jew; he's here, no doubt for the festivities, and comes to the temple, a sacred space and God's dwelling place on Earth, the place where Jesus fled to as a boy to be in his Father's house. The temple looked considerably different than our beautiful sacred place right here. It had a series of courtyards in which to buy animals for sacrifice. It was a magnificent place. Herod the Great had begun a massive restoration and expansion. And, it was into this newly reconstructed space that Jesus entered with the (quote) "ire of an Old Testament prophet." [Ibid] "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" he said.

Interestingly, all four of the Gospels include this story. The other three Gospels, the Synoptic Gospels, however, place it near the end of their Gospels, which actually may make more sense if we were reading a history book, reporting on the chronological events of the day. But, instead, we're reading the Good News of Jesus Christ, a story presented to us, not necessarily in chronological order, but, perhaps, in theological order. John, unlike the Synoptics, was more interested in telling us about the divinity of Jesus and seemingly wanted the reader to know from the very beginning, who Jesus was, as the Son of God. The animals would not be needed for sacrifice in Jesus' temple, because Jesus himself would be the sacrifice; he would become God's temple. He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Matthew, Mark and Luke presented a story of "cleansing" the temple. John, on the other hand, wrote a story where Jesus was claiming the authority over the temple. He himself would become a new type of temple, a temple that would call for a new type of worship. Jesus is the place where God and humanity come together.

Verse 18 begins: "The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Using the term, "Jews" here is not in reference to the entire Jewish community. Instead, they are a unique subset of the community, the religious authorities, the Pharisees, the high priests, the ones John has identified as those who have rejected Jesus. I can appreciate their question. The religious authorities have always done worship this one way. What's changed? Who is this guy? What sign has he given to lead us to believe that things are different now? Turning water into wine was Jesus' first sign of many. These signs were to provoke belief. And, yet, John stressed that faith that remains dependent on signs is immature and inadequate. They are merely meant to point to a deeper meaning. Some will have ears to hear and eyes to see and others will not. John tells us that some of the religious authorities will not be lead to Christ's deeper understanding of faith, one that will understand how a temple can be destroyed and be raised up in three days. To be honest even the disciples would not understand until after the resurrection. It's only then that things that once were confusing and mystifying would become clear. Presbyterian theologian and author, Joseph Small, reminds us in his essay on this text, "We know from the outset that Jesus does more than speak God's word; he is God's Word. What he says is more than the truth, for he is Truth." [reference place unknown] Jesus' act of cleansing the temple also raises the question of the cleansing of the church today. Just as the religious authorities couldn't understand

why Jesus was suggesting they do or understand things differently in the temple, we, too, are surprised or challenged when someone suggests we do things differently in the church. What do they call the seven last words of the church? We've never done it that way before! (That's not the first time I've used that line).

Included in the opening chapters of our constitution, the Book of Order, is this 17th century motto in Latin: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* – the church reformed always to be reformed according to the word of God. The first part of this motto is often misinterpreted as “The church reformed always reforming.” (including by me, by the way). This gives the impression that the church is the one who is in charge of the reforming. God help us all if we're the ones in charge of reforming God's church. Instead, this motto is in the passive voice, meaning, the church is to be reformed, to be acted upon, to be the object of reform, not its subject. The second part of the motto is “according to the word of God.” To quote the first part without the second is to misinterpret it entirely. It would suggest that we're the designer or the agent of the reform. The origin of the reform comes from outside the church; it comes from God. “It is God who judges, it is God who reforms, and it is God who renews the church. The shape of God's reform is in accordance to God's own word.” [quote, I believe, is also from Joseph Small] Reform in the church is not initiated by us, but by the Word of God, by Christ himself. The temple in which Jesus entered and drove out the money changers and all the rest, was also in the midst of change or reform. They just didn't know it yet. Jesus Christ, himself, would be that reform.

When Jesus stormed into that temple he drove out everything including the animals that were there to be sold for sacrifice on the temple's altar. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” He was speaking of the temple as his body. Jesus freed the animals metaphorically as well. The people, then and today, would no longer need the sacrificial lamb; we would no longer need the altar, for that matter. Instead of an altar we have a table, a table at which Jesus is the host, a table we are invited to join, a table at which we are invited to remember and to celebrate. It is at this table we remember Jesus as the reformer, the one who reformed the temple long ago, the one who continues to reform our church today, “the church reformed, always to be reformed according to the word of God.”

That's not to say we are to sit idly by and do nothing, waiting for Christ's return. Quite the contrary, we are to listen carefully to the word of God, seeking to do the will of God, to go out into this world as ambassadors for Christ, seeking justice, standing against oppression of any kind, and speaking God's truth to power. May we have the faith and strength to do so. Amen.