

Exodus 20:1-17  
John 2:13-22

## THE WAY THAT LEADS TO LIFE

A number of years ago, when I was in my second pastorate, I preached on this passage from John's Gospel wherein Jesus cleansed the temple. I felt pretty good about the sermon and I hoped people had heard the Word of God – not only that they understood the scripture lesson better but also that they would be able to live the biblical text in their day-to-day lives. At the conclusion of the worship service, I gave the Benediction and recessed down the middle aisle. When I got to the narthex, I was surprised to see our daughter, Laura, sitting at a table piled high with her wares; she was selling Girl Scout cookies! In my very best W. C. Fields' voice, I said to Laura, "One side, my little chickadee, stand aside, you bother me." Then, I switched to my normal voice and said, "Laura, didn't you hear my sermon? Get those cookies out of here. Take the cookies back to the kitchen and you can sell them there during the fellowship hour!"

It's interesting to note that while Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry where it led to his arrest and crucifixion, in John's gospel, the story of Jesus cleansing the temple is early on – it's one of Jesus' "inaugural events," which point to who he was and what the impact of his life, death, and resurrection would be. John is telling us "up front" that Jesus is the Messiah, and he will challenge time-honored customs and rituals that are influenced by human sinfulness and have drifted away from God's will. In cleansing the temple, Jesus defied the abuses that had been going on in its system of ritual sacrifice; he also challenged the system itself, saying, by this symbolic act, that God's presence on earth was now to be found in him, rather than a temple made of stone. (J. Lynn White, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Winter 2003, p. 34)

John tells us it was Passover. It's quite possible that as many as one hundred thousand Jewish people made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this holy festival. The multitude came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and to remember how Yahweh had delivered their ancestors from slavery down in Egypt. As Jesus approached the temple precinct, in the outermost court surrounding the temple there was a great deal of business activity and commotion going on. In an instant, Jesus sprang into action; he drove the animals and birds out of the temple area and overturned the tables of the moneychangers.

What prompted Jesus to upset the routine? Worship in the temple included animal sacrifices. Since it would be difficult for those on pilgrimage to bring an animal with them, they simply bought animals (cattle, sheep, or doves) on site. It's likely that the merchants charged an exorbitant fee for these offerings. The moneychangers converted foreign currency into the coins allowed in the temple, and they too probably made a hefty profit off of the pilgrims, who were at their mercy. There was also the risk that an animal might get loose, run wild, and violate the sanctuary or hurt someone. There was the clamor of the shopkeepers and merchants competing for the worshippers' attention. Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' outrage in this fashion: "Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a shopping mall!" (The Message, p. 1919).

And, all of this commotion took place in the outer Court of the Gentiles. The noise and bustle of all that commercial activity must have made it impossible for Gentile believers to experience the temple as a place of prayer. It's quite likely that Jesus' righteous anger was directed at both the system and the opportunists that permitted worshippers to be taken advantage of and the house of God to be desecrated.

When the authorities asked Jesus for a sign - i.e., what credentials could he present to justify his actions – Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The authorities scoffed at this notion for it had taken forty-six years to build Herod's temple. But, after his death and resurrection, Jesus' disciples came to the realization that Jesus was actually referring to his body as the Temple.

By this bold statement, Jesus was proclaiming that he is the exalted Lord, the Christ, the Son of God, Light of the world, and the Word of God who became human. He is Master over all, including even the temple. In fact, Jesus is claiming to be the "temple." He supplants the stone temple as the main way whereby we are brought closer to God. Jesus is the way that leads to life! In Jesus Christ, we see God's will acted out and we are shown the way that leads to life – life that is both abundant and eternal. Throughout Holy Scripture, we have seen how God's way is meant to enhance, enrich, and enlarge our lives. While some may see God's laws and commandments as being very restrictive and imposing limitations on us, they are actually intended to give us our greatest freedom possible.

This third Sunday in Lent is traditionally set aside to read the Ten Commandments and to reflect on how God's laws are not the opposite of God's grace; rather, they are tangible proof of God's grace. They are not an unfair, restrictive limitation of the good life; they are the steps that lead to the good life.

A wise parent does not leave a child to his or her own device to discover what way is right and what is wrong. The parent graciously teaches the child the way that leads to life. Likewise, God does not expect us to live by our own wits, which result in sad, chaotic, and confused lives. Rather, God bestows on us the wisdom of God, and, if heeded, we will experience our greatest freedom and our deepest joy in life.

With regard to the Ten Commandments, here is how one person summarized God's intent for us. "This is my word to you – you shall have only me as God. You shall not make images because they might become substitutes for me. You shall remember me one day a week, remembering your holy origin and your holy sustenance. You shall not show disrespect for me by wrongfully using my name – by taking my name and using it for yourself. And you shall show respect for others in your community. I am God and you are brothers and sisters. Therefore, honor those who give you life, don't kill each other, don't violate the rights of other's relationships and property. Don't look with envy and covet what belongs to your neighbor and develop trustworthy relationships by not lying to each other." (Dan Moseley, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Winter 1997, p. 22)

These and other commandments are not so much rules that are to be followed as the way that is to be walked. Someone has said, "This is like 'the finger pointing the way.' God's laws are reliable guides from God, pointing us in the right direction." I remember a seminary professor once telling our class to envision driving out on the long highway that stretches over the Florida Keys. He said to us, "Now imagine that there are no guard rails; what a different experience that would be if you had to drive that same road without guard rails." He went on to say that God's laws, somewhat like those guardrails, act to keep us safe; they both guide us and guard us from harm and deliver us safely to our destination. In other words, God's laws lead us to the life that God desires for us. They are meant to free, not to enslave. The commandments are seen as a gift of a gracious God. We can trust God to show us the way that leads to life.

Desmond Tutu, the black Episcopal Archbishop of South Africa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his ongoing nonviolent struggle against apartheid, was once asked to recall the formative experience of his life. He replied, "One incident comes to mind immediately. When I was a young child I saw a white man tip his hat to a black woman. Please understand that such a gesture is completely unheard of in my country. The white man was an Episcopal bishop and the black woman was my mother." (Pulpit Resource, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 52) When we all follow God's rules, it leads to life for all of us.

It is no mere coincidence that Jesus claimed to be "the Way" and that he came, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law. He came to show us not just the better way but the best way that leads us closer to God, and thus, to life. And, as the One who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," Jesus not only tells us the way, he goes with us and shows us the way.

As we reflect on the gift of God's holy laws, and especially God's gift of the Son, I wonder if we sense the need to repent of our own sins. Where does Jesus need to enter into our lives and clean house? What unholy attitudes does Jesus need to confront and drive out from within us that would stand between us and a healthier, holier relationship with God and with others? Why do we continually settle for less when God offers us the way that leads to what is best, the way that leads to life?

The good news of the gospel is that God made good on the divine promise: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Although Jesus' body was destroyed and crucified on the cross, his death became the means by which our sins are forgiven; and, his resurrection grants us new life right now as well as beyond the grave. By the indwelling Spirit, we have available power to turn away from sin, to be reconciled to God, restored to our neighbor, and we are on the way that leads to life. Let us invite Jesus into our own temples, into our very lives, and ask him to get rid of all that is unclean and unholy, all the evil that drives us away from God and drives a wedge between "me and thee," all that is harmful and not helpful. Then, let us trust that the good news of the gospel is truly good news meant for us personally: "In Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven!" Then, renewed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, let us rise up and walk the way that leads to life – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens  
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA  
March 15, 2009