

Sermon 15 March 2009

Transformers

John 2:13-22, Psalm 19: 7-14

Theme: Love transforms our old communities into new ones. Love overturns our set tables clearing the way for new tables that include all.

John 2:13-22: The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our heavenly parent, our foundation, our temple of love. Amen.

When you see an accident unfolding before your eyes, how do you feel?

Scattered coins and turned tables... How did you feel when Michael just marched up here and made a mess of things?

Now, I knew this was going to happen. I still got chills! The noise! The commotion! Just watching Michael have the courage to do it. Jesus may have done it, but not in our church! Pretty unnerving for me.

Imagine watching Jesus make a similar scene in the Temple court in Jerusalem. Imagine being his disciple. Shocked? Embarrassed? "What are people going to say now?!" Confused? "What the heck is Jesus doing, anyway?" Afraid? "We are all going to be in trouble now! Why make such a scene?"

Why, indeed? Why such a scene?

Strewn coins and overturned tables aside, let me introduce you to a young man, Frankie.

Frankie: Hi, I am Frankie. Strong, handsome, witty, that is me! I chill with my gang. Me and my gang often stir up the streets. But my old man, prominent in business, keeps me out of jail. I do not worry...A wink here, a nod there, a "Boys-will-be-boys" comment, the occasional payment, and I walk free.

Then the war comes. I like adventure, so I join the forces. We deploy on operations. In a minor skirmish, a forgotten battle now, the enemy ambushes my unit. They capture me.

One of the hardest parts for me being a POW is not knowing when the war will end. When will I be released? Days melt into months. I sit in my cell thinking of home. A particular memory often comes to mind, of this homeless guy. Me and my gang had just scored some food and drink, then this bag-man shows up. I feel sorry for the beggar. I give him what I have. My gang gives me a hard time about it afterwards. Now, as I sit in this prison, that beggar's face returns to me. I feel his hunger. I know his pain. But, you know, aside from that *one* time, when was I any good to anyone?

(young man returns to his seat in the pews)

With the sweep of a hand, Jesus gets everyone's attention. Coins clatter to the floor. Overturned tables crash. Jesus aligns himself with the thundering prophets of old and leaves no room for misunderstanding. His judgment is clear and swift.

Jesus cries, "Stop making God's house into a marketplace!" *Oy'-kos*, the Greek word for house, provides the root for our word "economy." And in the Greek word for "marketplace," *em-por'-ee-on*; we can hear our word "emporium." God's house operates not on an economy of the shekel or the dollar. God's economy is not like a profit-driven marketplace or emporium.

Jesus's action cries out, "Re-organize! Re-think your lives! Remember your religious heritage!" Remember the lesson from the prophet Micah. God does not want burnt offerings. God does not want offerings of thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil. God cannot be bought off with money! God does not want the sacrifice of your firstborn for the sins of your soul.

So, what does God want?

God wants justice! “What does the LORD require of you?” Micah’s familiar words remind us, God wants us “to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly” with our God. God wants justice! God wants right relationships between us and our neighbours. And the “trading coin” of God's realm is not forged from silver, but from love, love made known in relationships. Love made known in justice for all.

Turning over the tables, driving out the animals, may look like a sort-of spring cleaning of the temple. But this is more than simply spring-cleaning. Jesus cries out, “It is time to listen up! And time to clean up our act!” Jesus’ disturbing wake-up call is about Transformation. Listen up! Turn your backs on the old. Seek something new. Get right with God!

I have a second visitor to introduce to you. She is high in the leadership of a nation, not THE leader, but one of the leaders. Here she is now.

Nation’s Leader:

Hello. My people and my nation prosper, but we leaders recognize that our country needs resources for its industries. We need oil. We do our best to trade, but the countries that have the natural resources we seek, limit what they sell us. And they fix the prices.

We leaders have promised our people that our way of life will not change! Yet these nations threaten not only our way of life, but our very existence. They despise our prosperity. So we launch surprise attacks hoping that with shock and awe, we will overwhelm our enemies, and seize the resources we need.

We leaders tell our people that our mission will be accomplished quickly. And we do hope that the war ends soon. But months of warfare have grown into years. Victory seems to hover just on the horizon. Is victory real, or a mere mirage? (*Leader returns to her place in the pews*).

Pause...

Two vignettes...Two stories about people and war. But let us look deeper.

The country seeking oil and natural resources resorts to war. Sound familiar? But this scenario is not from today. It is from seventy years ago. And the country is not in the Americas or Europe, but sits on Asia's edge. The country launches attacks against China and Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, Singapore, Hong Kong, and finally sneak attacks against the Philippines and Pearl Harbor. The nation is.... yes, Japan. A war meant to end in months stretches into years. The end comes with the holocaust at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

And Frankie, he could be a contemporary, American youngster. But Frankie calls Italy home. After his time as a POW, he returns home. While waiting to be re-deployed, Frankie falls ill. Laid low, Frankie realizes that the answer to the world's woes is not found at the end of a sword. Frankie's story is not current, as it comes to us from the 13th century. We remember Frankie as... anyone want to hazard a guess? Yes, St. Francis of Assisi.

Japan, Frankie and overturned tables: Jesus calls us to transformation.

From selfish and self-serving policies of the thirties and forties the Japanese people transform themselves. Their post-war constitution stands as an example to all nations. It prohibits offensive warfare and bans nuclear weapons.

Francis, realizes that God, Jesus, beckons him to a new way of being and he is transformed. He turns his back on power, prominence and wealth. Rather, he finds meaning in relationship to the people around him, especially the poor. Francis finds meaning in the creation around him: the sun, the moon, the stars, the beasts of the field.

God wants each of us, and all of us, to be responsible. No more blaming the snake. No more saying, “The devil made me do it.” No more blaming our mums' or dads' or whatever happened to our inner child. God wants us to be mature, to grow up.

For so many of us, that coming to maturity is liberating, like the Israelites walking away from their enslavement. That experience is discovering we do not have to be servants of the bottle or the pills or dreams of riches and power. That coming to maturity is a “born again” experience.

Jesus calls us to transform our relationships with one another. Do we scratch our heads and wonder, “Is this radical transformation possible?” Look at St. Francis and Japan. Francis did it. Japan did it. God calls us and our nation to be transformed, too. For it is in loving relationships that we find life's meaning. It is in working for justice that we find life's purpose.

As church, as people, individual and corporate, as nations, Jesus calls us to turn our backs on what the world would have us do, and each day, each month, each year discover what God requires of us. To love justice, seek mercy and walk humbly with our God.

Let us pray:

God, you invite us to be transformed. It feels like such risky business. We know there are tables that need to be overturned in our lives. We know there is spring cleaning, and more, that we need to do. Show us how to move from seeking security through worldly wealth to seeking goodness through justice. Show us new ways to approach the people and world around us. Show us how to walk more closely with Jesus. Give us the humility we need to have our tables overturned and the courage to turn over the tables and scatter the coins that uphold injustice.