

What Are You Thinking¹, Jesus?

My sermon offers some American history weaved with personal history about which I've previously talked, so forgive the repetition, but ... imagine at some parts of my story Jesus walking onto the scene like he entered the Temple to worship for Passover in today's Gospel where we have a display of what a pastor friend calls 'holy anger'.

I grew up in a so-called 'black middle class' home, much like your homes. We like other post-WWII families had 'made it' in our context. Through the GI Bill, this was the first time in the history of this country that any group of African American men were given this blanket equal opportunity. This opportunity created the first 'middle class' existence within the African American community. My Dad had a good government job, owned a Studebaker and bought some property on the outskirts of Harrisburg where he refurbished a run-down house and made it the home I lived in for ten years. As with many African Americans with his resources, he joined the Presbyterian Church which like most Christian churches in the mid-20th century was still racially segregated. Many churches of mainline denominations (Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist) *were* racially segregated because after the end of the Civil War, those African Americans who wanted to remain with the denominations of their former owners were not allowed to worship with them, but were given mission churches to worship in. (This is one of those points of imagining Jesus' Holy Anger for me.) We belonged to one of the mission churches established for African Americans in Harrisburg. The Episcopal mission church established by St. Stephens in Harrisburg was called St. Gerald's. To the credit of the Bishop of the Diocese of Harrisburg he desegregated the churches in Harrisburg in the 1950s.²

Church determined who you were in society in the 1950s and 60s, regardless who you were. And, wanting to fit into our new middle class roles and trying to reflect the norms of the greater white society, African American social norms required that we attend church in an *acceptable* manner. We were Presbyterian, and in the African American community that meant we were a rung up. To maintain that status, dressing 'acceptably' was a law of going to Church. I had special church clothes: shoes, socks, dresses, coats, hats, gloves and purses

¹A question often asked rhetorically by Mother Barbara.

²William Chapman, free-lance historian and member of St. Paul's Church, Harrisburg.

with the little lace hankies. This might seem matter-of-fact to you, but for African Americans it was a big deal. There was marked judgment of those who did not attend in an acceptable manner. I was young when I realized that if I didn't have the proper clothes to attend church, neither I nor anyone else could probably attend. And, I accepted this tenet of faith without question. But, as I grew older I began to question why I *had* to dress a certain way to go to church. Why were clothes sacrosanct to worshipping? And, what if my Dad was no longer able to afford to give me the clothing to meet the standard of acceptance?

Conditions on worship is what Jesus was protesting when he turned over the money-changers' tables, and drove out the animals from the Temple. Jesus came into the Temple to worship God during the Passover, and was met with the business of worship before he could go kneel and worship in 'his Father's house'. Some scholars think he was overturning the sacrificial worship system (Raymond Brown. *Anchor Bible Commentary: The Gospel of John.*). But, I don't think he was trying to change the mode of worship, but the *way* of worship. The money changers and sacrificial animal salesmen cheapened God's love and, therefore, watered down Jesus' mission as God's messenger of that love. Their commerce misrepresented the relationship of love between God and us by putting up an impediment, or a condition to receive it. How were people going to be able to receive God's love with these physical impediments between them and worshipping God? For Jesus, this was unacceptable because he was among us to bring us closer *to* God, and these conditions of worship were standing in his way.

At age seventeen I went to church during summer vacation from boarding school *not wearing stockings*, and all the proper women of the church talked to me about my impropriety. And, my aunt-who-was-raising-me asked me, "Betsy, what were you thinking?" I was thinking that if I didn't dress like I was supposed to, inhospitable reactions would be probably be conditional to my freely worshipping. It saddened me that I was right. I thought about the people who lived near our church in the public housing project who definitely did not have the wherewithal to meet our dress standard of worship. I thought it wasn't right to place things between the people who might want to come to our Church but didn't have the 'right life style' to come in. Being acceptable was the fee we charged to worship, just as race had prevented white and African American people from worshipping and learning to love God together. We

hindered the flow of God's love to us by thinking we were better than the people who could not afford to dress acceptably. That we were being discriminated against by the white world did not justify the conditions we put on worshiping God. 'What are *we* thinking?' I asked my aunt.

The Temple authorities were asking Jesus, 'what are you thinking?' when he upset the worship system. His disciples remembered after God raised him from the dead that Jesus said he 'had a zeal for God's house'. First century Jewish theology maintained that where the Temple is, so is God. The fact that people were forced to transact business to worship inside the Temple walls put it in God's face. And, Jesus was adamant that worldly business should not be where God is. He was so adamant about this that he even drove off the dove salesmen who sold to the poor for their worship, and from whom he would probably have purchased his sacrifice. His is a Holy Anger that commands to follow the Commandments God gave to us: that we not take the Lord's name in vain with our worldly cares that stand between the people and the worship of God; or, that substitute the idolatry of our worldly cares for God.³ And, then, the Gospel writer John shifts the meaning of the Temple from the stone walls to the temple that is the resurrected body of Christ Jesus. When asked what sign are you showing with upending the Temple worship system, Jesus gives a post-resurrection response that shifts our attention to the New Covenant which is his body and his blood. Even if the Temple is destroyed, Jesus tells them, God will still have a place in my resurrected body. Jesus is where God is, and wants nothing to stand in the way of the divine relationship of love with us.

Hindrances cut off the flow of love from God to us. We as a nation hinder God's flow of love to all of us when we did not allow human beings to be human. Our nation's complicity with global economics has created global hunger. We put Band-Aids on it with our gifts to CARE and OXFAM, but know, our gifts do not sufficiently move us out of the way as a hindrance to the flow of God's love to us. God designed a new love through Jesus Christ, a love that is able to end the economic trend that impoverishes and provides for one that feeds.

And, 'what are we thinking?' Are *we* standing in the way of Jesus' desire for people to know God through him? Do we allow the secular world to cloud our vision of our belief with the

³<http://jubileejusticeeconomics.blogspot.com/2015/03/jesus-and-international-exchange.html>. March 6, 2015. 2207.

importance of schedules, sports and or sleeping in on Sunday mornings? Do we allow our questions of faith to get in the way of seeking answers of faith? Do we make formation too daunting to enable those seeking to find their faith? Do we allow our fears of bodies and minds that are transitioning with age to hold in place those things that are familiar? Do we throw out the tried-and-true for what's trending now? These are some of the hindrances that stand in the way of the Church's hope of an eternal connection with God in the risen body of Christ Jesus. They stand in the way *in a way* this church doesn't when we invite all to the Lord's Table. Each time we go to the Lord's Table we travel the physical pathway to the altar recreating Jesus' journey to the Temple to experience the divine love that flows between us and God. Through the mystical body and blood of the risen Christ, there is nothing standing in the way. Let us step out of our own way, and keep that pathway open for ourselves and for all who want to receive God's love, love that is without hindrance, and love that is intended for us all. Amen.