

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on March 3, 2024.**

ORTHODOXY

<Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19:1-14; John 2:13-21>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

The last time I was in Scotland my wife and I were attempting to find a place to get dinner after arriving earlier that day. We had flown for about 10 hours, rented a car at the airport, and then driven about an hour to our first stop, after first driving half an hour in the wrong direction. We were checked into our room, but needed dinner. We retraced our steps somewhat to find a takeout fish & chips place we had passed looking for our accommodations.

We were tired, and a bit overwhelmed. Or at least I was. As we ordered, we made our way along the counter until we eventually reached the cash register. Once there, the person at the register looked at me and articulated...something in a thick accent. I did not want to appear to be a clueless tourist, but I was having difficulty making sense of what was being asked. Nor had I studied the local currency to know what was what. So in response, I took out a few bills and coins from my pocket and held it out to the cashier with the comment, "I have this much," hoping that they would take pity on me and help me suss out the amount needed for payment.

At which point my lovely, darling wife nearly slapped the money out of my hand getting me to put it down. "Put that away," she mumbled. "They're just asking you what you want to drink!"

It was an innocent misunderstanding, and a harmless one at that. It's fun to laugh at nowadays. But not all misunderstandings have such innocent impacts, especially when it comes to money and livelihood, and most especially when it comes to how we relate to God and one another.

For these reasons alone, the scene presented to us in John's gospel this morning is one which is certainly not so innocent. And every time I read of this encounter - one of the few to appear in all four gospels - I try to see the situation from both Jesus' perspective as well as that of the religious and temple leaders, to use my creative theological imagination to get a sense of how the different people in this story are viewing the situation. I almost inevitably begin by placing myself in the perspective of the religious leaders.

After all, they are the ones who have signed off on the money-changers and sellers in the temple courtyard. They are the ones who have condoned if not encouraged the transactions. They are the ones who profit, at least partially, from what is transpiring. And to at least some degree, they are the ones who question Jesus' behavior through the lens of "we've done it this way forever; who are you to come in and tell us otherwise?". Too often, such a perspective reflects the practice at hand without truly considering the rationale. Put another way, it's a reality of following the letter of the example without understanding the reason for the example.

And this gets confused for orthodoxy. Defined, orthodoxy is “the accepted and traditional manner of doing something.” Oftentimes this is used in a negative, or less than popular way, but at its root it’s neutral. Similarly, it often gets used in a way that connotes stubborn rigidity or practice without understanding.

The story is told of a poor holy man who wished, in his daily faithful living, to offer what sacrifice he could to God during his devotions. As he did not have much, and food was scarce, he offered what he did have: a dish of butter.

Every morning, at the outset of his devotions, he would place this dish upon the windowsill, and then proceed with his prayers. He soon came to realize that, every day, his cat would likewise proceed to help himself to the butter. Eventually, the man began by first tying his cat to the bedpost, then offering his dish of butter, and then proceeding with his devotions and prayers. Eventually, the man died, but his devotion lived on. Those who followed in his example would likewise place a dish of butter on the windowsill to reflect their offering to God, and if they didn’t already own a cat, they would go out and buy one in order to then tie it to the bedpost.

Practice without contemplation. Ritual without mindfulness.

There is a nuance, and an important one, to note when it comes to orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is not meant, I believe, to simply be the accustomed and accepted forms of practice. Rather, it is to represent the *root* of why a practice is done in the first place. In our case, whatever practices we may have ought to lead us into a closer connection to and awareness of the grace of God in Christ.

For the religious and temple leaders of the day, we could make the argument that the presence of the moneychangers and sellers in the temple courtyard was originally meant to enable people to approach and engage in the temple rituals. People would make long journeys to Jerusalem in order to worship in the temple. And in the case of the Passover Celebration, they would be there for at least a week. They may not have travelled with the necessary items to offer as sacrifice, so it made sense for there to be an approved and official means for offering such items. Or perhaps they were foreigners, who did not have the appropriate currency to offer. Only Jewish coins could be used for tithes and offerings in the temple, so it made sense for there to be moneychangers. And if they profited, and the religious leaders profited, well...sometimes we don’t look too closely at the common practice.

But there had to be a greater reason for Jesus to be this upset, upset to the point of turning tables and driving out animals. To help us understand this a bit better, it becomes important for us to return to the original intent, the orthodox of that matter. Because while it was important for the people who gathered at the temple to offer right sacrifices and make appropriate tithes, that was not the primary purpose of the practice. Rather, the primary purpose, the original purpose behind the practice, was, I believe, to enable the people to draw close to the Divine.

This is not a new or surprising understanding. Tracing all the way back to the people of God as they began anew as the people of God, there in the wilderness after their time of slavery, we are reminded of this. As the people learn of and reclaim their identity as God’s people, they find that everything they have known as slaves in a foreign land is not suitable for leading them in this new covenant of Life. They can no longer be those people.

And so, as a guide for how to live as a faithful people with a faithful God, to live in the communion of faith with God and each other, new laws were enacted. From this, we receive the Ten Commandments, along with dozens of other minor commands and rules of community living. But behind all of them, informing all of them, is the singular most important reason: God is God, and we live in relationship with God. We live in relationship with each other through God. Any of these commandments and laws ultimately point us back to this relational dynamic. And any practice of the people, individually or communally, must reflect that, as well. They are intended to enable and equip the people to draw close to God in the covenant of Life. It was true then. It's still true today.

Back to the scene at the temple courtyard.

Jesus is upset, and according to John, he proclaims indignantly that God's house has been turned into a marketplace. We tend to focus on this to the exclusion of any other historical dynamics at play. For instance, while the temple itself was reserved for Jewish people to gather in worship and prayer - to draw close to God - I learned that the courtyard of the temple, still within the temple walls, was the place that Gentile believers would be able to gather, likewise for worship and prayer. Is Jesus then only dismayed at the money changing hands and the implied profiting that is going on? He probably is, but that may not be the only reason. Along with that, with all the money changers and sellers, there would no longer be the room for others who desired to be in close, intimate relationship with God to gather and pray, to worship, as well.

As we can see throughout the gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly refers to his ministry and mission as one which is to draw people closer to God. Anything that inhibits that is open to scrutiny.

Tradition can inform life; Orthodoxy can remind us of our foundational roots. But always, these perspectives should point us back to what gives us purpose and direction in the first place. And always, they should remind us of the overall goal and intent. In the life of faith, in the covenant which has been established, it is for all of us to draw closer and closer to God. In our practices of faith, it is to enable us and others to achieve this. In the season of Lent, we are particularly reminded and invited to audit our lives of faith and determine whether the practices align with the purpose. Anything that inhibits a person who desires to draw close to God to actually do so needs to be weighed and considered carefully, prayerfully.

God desires life for us; hence our covenant of Life. Jesus would see this realized in the fullest degree possible, for all people, for all of creation. As we continue in Lent, as we continue to live in faith, our goal and our mission is to proclaim Life and enact practices which lead to life. In this, may we indeed be an orthodox people. Amen.