

Homily – Church On Monday

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March 7, 2021 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

King David and King Solomon are not part of today's Scripture readings, but I want to start with them anyway because they are a good illustration of the tension in today's Gospel reading. David is that shepherd from three thousand years ago who slew the giant Goliath and then went on to become the greatest King of the Hebrew people. He is credited with writing the Psalms, but he is also a murderer. King David is said to have been a role model for us on prayer and repentance. He is said to have been a master of the spiritual journey as he drew closer to God, others, and self. David was a free spirit who danced with wild abandon before God. And, Solomon was a son of David, and he was the king of Israel after David. King Solomon is credited with building the first great Temple in Jerusalem. He is a master administrator, and he built both the religious and governmental institutions of Israel. In today's tech world the contrast between David and Solomon would be the contrast between the entrepreneur who built something new and the administrator who took the company public. David was the creative free spirit and Solomon was the administrator. Both were necessary in the history of ancient Israel, but I wonder if something was lost when religion became an institution. It may be telling that the Kingdom of Israel split in two after the death of Solomon perhaps because something spiritual was lost with the institutionalization of the Temple. This is the same tension that we have today. Our church is an institution with its processes and policies, but we are also the community that works to bring the energy of God into the world.

Fast forward one thousand years from David and Solomon, and we have the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as told to us in the four Gospels of our Bible. And, in today's reading from the Gospel according to John we have the famous story of Jesus and the money changers. With great zeal and energy Jesus forcefully pushes the money changers and market sellers out of the entrance to the Temple. It is written, "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!"

In this story Jesus is clearly and undeniably angry. Jesus' anger seems to be directed at the money changers and animal sellers who were crowding the outer courts of the Temple. By extension, we might also see that his anger is directed at the powers that be, the Temple priests, for they enabled and permitted the activities of the money changers and animal sellers.

Two thousand years ago, the donation and subsequent sacrifice of animals at the Temple were required activities for observant Jews. And, since many traveled quite a distance to get to the Temple, they needed a place to buy clean animals that were up to the rigid purity standards of the Temple. Furthermore, a Temple tax was required, and it could not be paid in Greek or Roman coin since those coins had an image of the emperor on them. Other coins were needed, and for a fee the money changers were happy to provide the proper currency. However, the prices and fees to do so were exorbitantly high and abusive. This was especially burdensome to the poor who were trying to be close to God at the Temple. The traditional interpretation of today's Gospel reading is that the great institutional Temple of Jerusalem along with the leaders of that Temple had gone astray. They were actually an obstruction to relationship with God, others, and self. Jesus declares that this must be torn down and rebuilt in a way that brings the energy of God back into the world.

Now here are the implications for us today in 2021 as we practice our spirituality. We have a living God who continues to provide fresh revelation to us. In today's story, "Jesus challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to that fresh revelation from God. It is easy for us to fall into this same trap.

What things do we do as Christians that have run their course, and we no longer need them? What institutional things do we cling to even though they do not lead us into healthy relationship with God? And most specifically, what things do we do as Episcopalians that distract us from being relevant to the spiritual lives of those around us? These are tough questions, and I believe Lent is good times to tackle these questions.

But there is more... Some of our traditions and spiritual practices may actually be keeping people from God. There may be unintended things that we do that remove people from a path to God. The animal sellers and the moneychangers got in the way of the seekers of God, and we may be doing the same.

What might we be doing to keep away those who are non-Anglo? What might we be doing that pushes away young adults? What might we be doing that tells people they must have a deep history with the Episcopal Church before they are invited into leadership of our church? A healthy, loving relationship with God is strengthened when we examine these questions to see what we might do differently.

In her book "The Great Emergence" Phyllis Tickle writes that the Church must reinvent itself every five hundred years. This was last done by the Reformation of the Middle Ages, but it is something that may be brewing today. Covid-19 and the

lifting of the related shelter at home emergency may bring this to a head as we begin to gather in new ways. But, the call for St. Barnabas to change is not just a year old.

Diana Butler Bass is a church historian that has been writing about contemporary views of the Church, and she points out that the institution of the Church is pretty unpopular in today's society. How many times have we heard someone say, "I am spiritual, but not religious"? Diana Butler Bass points out that this kind of phrase indicates a backlash against the institution of the Church. In general, institutions are not very popular these days, and this includes our Church. The thought of church structure, church governance and church meetings is anathema to many.

Retired Bishop Stacy Sauls offers a view about this inflection point for this institution we call the church. He points out "The church has been captive to the dominant culture, which has rewarded it with power, privilege and prestige for a long, long time. The Episcopal Church is now liberating itself from that, and is paying the price, not for what ails us, but for being a follower of Jesus. The Episcopal Church is on record as standing by those the culture marginalizes whether that be nonwhite people, female people or gay people. This is deeply true to the tradition of Jesus, Jesus who offended the "traditionalists" of his own day, Jesus who was known to have turned the tables on institutional authorities, Jesus who told his followers to seek him among the poor. What ails the Episcopalians is that this once most-established class of American Christianity is taking the risk to be radically true to its tradition. There is a price to be paid for that. There is also a promise of abundant life in it."

So, what are we supposed to do about this institution we call the Church?

It is both a strength and a weakness.

It connects us and divides us.

It brings us together and causes us to flee.

It is a human thing that is trying to do God's work.

In my opinion a person can't be alone in his or her journey towards God. I think the relationship with God is something that is strengthened when we walk with one another in that spiritual journey towards God. We are stronger with one another rather than when we are alone. However, many of us will always have a love / hate relationship with the institutional Church.

Before I finished today, I want to briefly re-look at breathing fresh life into the institutional church. Laura Nash & Scotty McLennon, wrote a book called "Church on

Sunday, Work on Monday.” In it, the authors point out that there is a big disconnect between those who work in what they call the marketplace and those who work in faith-based organizations. Businesspeople feel that pastors do not understand the pressures and nuances of being in the marketplace. In addition, businesspeople do not feel they can take their lessons from the Sunday sermon into the office. Conversely, pastors do not appreciate the attitudes that some businesspeople bring to church meetings and do not believe that the marketplace represents Christian ethics. In order for Christianity to be more relevant, followers of Jesus must find a way to bridge this gap between David and Solomon. In its chapters “Church on Sunday, Work on Monday” provides many ways to find the intersection between religion and the marketplace. With this intersection in mind, we must ask ourselves, how can churches structure themselves to enable the fresh breath of God in the world? What can we learn about decision making so that we don’t have endless arguments about the same things each month. Conversely, by bringing the Sunday into the rest of the week, followers of Jesus will feel a lot more integrity between the major areas of their lives. And, we can help heal a very broken world. We can help loosen the bonds of this world on our souls and once again be free to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the world.

Many of us are good at using Sunday morning to focus on God. We remember what Jesus has done for us. We feel the Spirit moving in our lives. Like King David, we worship God by dancing with wild abandon, at least on the inside. Now we must be a church that equips you to take all of this Sunday morning with you into the rest of the week.