

“Unintended Consequences”, sermon based on John 2:13-22, March 4, 2018, by Rev. Lance Weisser, St. Paul’s Cathedral.

In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Spirit, Amen.

My dear friends in Christ,

My gratitude to Dean Ken for sharing his pulpit with me this morning.

During my grade school years, boys in my class only hung out with boys and girls with girls--except for me and Janie Urbach. Janie Urbach and I were BFFs from Kindergarten right on through. We spent recesses and after school together, and because our desks were arranged in alphabetical order, Urbach and Weisser meant we got to sit next to one another at the extreme back of the classroom. Each of us was really a piece of work. Janie had a favourite dress she wore every single day, to the point where the little flowers on it kind of faded even as one stood staring at it. Her hair was always messy and her barrettes kept falling off. And I, being a preacher’s kid, had to wear church members’ hand-me-downs, with pants too large and shirts too small, and these awful suspenders trying to hold the two together. Both of us were day dreamers--Janie because her IQ was so high she was bored to tears, and me because I was utterly convinced Peter Pan was about to fly to the classroom window any second and take me away from it all. And every once in a while it got to be too much and Mrs. Mosher would find it necessary to call us out. “Miss Urbach, would you maybe like to stop chewing your hair for a few minutes and pay attention?” And in her next breath I’d hear: “Mr. Weisser, your desk is not a piano, so please reserve practicing your scales at home and not while the rest of us are learning about pronouns.”

What Mrs. Mosher was doing of course was trying to return her classroom to order. Things had kind of gotten out of hand, so she stepped in and made things right again--no more, no less. And in our very familiar lesson from the Gospel of John this morning, we find Jesus restoring order to the temple by reining in and calling out the money changers and merchants and others who were using the outer temple courts as places of business. This was in those times common practice--the outer courtyard was large and a place where sacrificial animals were sold. People came to it from far and wide, needed to have animals for the Priests to offer in oblation and because their currency was foreign, needed to exchange it. However, the temple--Jesus was pointedly making clear, by literally overturning their tables and chairs--was not a Costco. In both these examples, it is a situation where disorder was perceived and a new order, a new rightness had to be imposed. And yet by doing so, there were unintended consequences.

Unintended consequences, because whenever Mrs. Mosher found it necessary to use Janie and I as examples of misbehaviour, a curious thing would then immediately ensue--something which made me brace myself and hold my breath--for whenever we were called out, the rest of the class would suddenly erupt in a strange kind of dark delight, guffawing and turning around to stare at the two of us, pointing and leering, chanting ‘Janie and Lancie sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g’ and joining in a sort of odd dance of cruel joy as though Mrs. Mosher hated us as much as they themselves did. It would take her whole minutes to regain control of the room.

As mentioned in my previous sermons, I was ordained into the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1985. At that time we had a daughter, Julia, who was and still is, Jewish. She was and is Jewish because her mother, my former wife was and is Jewish, and Jews inherit their Jewishness through the maternal line. So throughout my ten years as a Pastor my Jewish wife and daughter would be in church listening and sharing in the life of our various congregations. On Friday nights at our dinner table in the Manse, the candles would be lit and over them would be said the Sabbath blessing: שְׁבַת שֶׁל נֵר לְהַדְלִיק וְצַנְנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו קִדְשָׁנוּ אֲשֶׁר הָעוֹלָם מְלֶךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲדֹנָי אֵתָהּ בְּרוּךְ [Baruch A-tah Ado-nai E-lo-hei-nu Me-lech Ha-olam A-sheer Ki-de-sha-nu Be-mitz-vo-tav Ve-tzi-va-nu Le-had-lik Ner Shel Sha-bbat Ko-desh. Translation: Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to kindle the light of the holy Sabbath candles.] During Advent the kitchen and dining room were decorated for Hanukkah and the living room for Christmas. During Lent the kitchen and dining room were decorated for Passover and the living room for Easter.

And I confess to you that when the time came for me to read the lessons on those Sundays leading up to Good Friday and the crucifixion, I would become somewhat anxious and feel a kind of disquiet as I looked down from the pulpit at my wife. That is not because of the scripture passages in and of themselves. It is, rather, because of their unintended consequences and the accumulated cultural and historical responses to those passages. For today's lesson from John finds Jesus restoring good order to the temple courts, and the message is one of restoration, of cleansing, of renewal, of returning things to their rightful place and purpose. History, however, shows us that the reaction to this passage has frequently been like those in my class at school, for rather than seeing this as Jesus restoring good order to the temple--no more, no less--it has been seen over the centuries as Jesus the Christian superhero whipping and punishing those dirty temple defiling villains, the Jews. Passages like this were turned into opportunities for seeing Jews as usurers, pointing at and stereotyping them as being obsessed with making money, loving gold, history's money changers, doing anything for a profit, accused of secretly trying to rule the world through finance and exploitation. Shakespeare created villains like Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice', a Jewish moneylender who demands payment of a pound of flesh and is forced to convert to Christianity. Dickens created villains like Fagin in 'Oliver Twist' a Jewish exploiter of street children, making them pick pockets in order to make large profits for himself.

Does it get worse? Oh, we know that it does. If I'd been asked by my Sunday School teacher in 1954 who it was that killed Jesus, I'd have instantly replied, 'The Jews killed Jesus'--this, out of the mouth of babes, only a few years following the discovery of Dachau and Auschwitz and the slaughter of 6 million and the resulting Nuremberg Trials. For down through history our theological forebears, the people of Moses, the ones whose love for God and righteousness earned them the name The Chosen People, have been hideously disfigured by names like 'Christ haters', 'Christ killers', 'Christ deniers', and seen as the scourge of society, called 'Kikes', and rounded up by Papal inquisitions and crusades, the subject of torture and burnings, forced expulsions, ghettoizing, mass persecutions and death on a scale without parallel in human history. And I recall with a clarity I normally do not possess how during my seminary years at Knox College at The Toronto School of Theology, our New Testament Professor, Dr. Humfries said to us during one of his lectures, 'The achilles heel of the gospel writings is their latent antisemitism.'

As heavy and dark as all of this sounds, we are in the middle of a six week period and season of reflection, introspection, self-assessment, penance, soul-searching and yearning for restoration and a return to righteousness--for this is the Season of Lent when our personal tables are overturned and our lives are self-examined and found wanting. The corresponding observance within Judaism is Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement, when worshipping Jews everywhere fast and suspend normal activity in order to gather at the temple to pray and atone for their sins. Our ultimate day of atonement as Christians is Good Friday, that day of days when we stand at the foot of the cross and wonder with fear and trembling what we as humans have done to cause this man of sorrows to suffer such cruelty so as to finally die and hang like a piece of meat from two planks of splintered wood. For as surely as at age seven I would have eagerly said the words 'The Jews killed Jesus', I now at age 70 admit, "I know who killed Jesus. People just like me, and even yet, I still sadly do in the way I choose to worship him one day and utterly abandon him the next. As the Book of Common Prayer so incisively puts it: 'We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, We have offended against thy holy laws, We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.'"

I recall visiting an older member of one of the two congregations in rural Quebec that I served. It happened during Holy Week and she revealed to me with a great big smile that her most favourite of the Church Seasons was Lent. Her smile made me inquire as to why she loved Lent so much, simply because I myself thought of it as a rather somber period. "Because," she said, "After losing my husband, Herbert, I finally get to be as full of tears and grief as I wish--I can sit at Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services with a red face and puffy eyes and not have to apologize. I get so tired of having to pretend that I'm happy during Advent, Christmas and Epiphany." And then she grabbed a tissue and smiled again before bursting into tears. Again, unintended consequences, for truly no one intends to turn Advent and Christmas into a period of enforced happiness. And Lent, indeed, is that time when we can let all those inner misgivings, sorrows, insecurities, griefs, ancient hurts, unhealed wounds simply and utterly be--be felt, be mourned, be let go of, be allowed to be, be prayed over and expressed. We reach deep inside and hug the base of the cross and feel his wounds and feel the same conflicting emotions of St. Peter, who must have stood there in anguish knowing he both loved Him more than his own self, while also having just denied he even knew who He was. We are he. We are both perpetrators and victims, witnesses and the accused, punishers and punished, believers and aloof bystanders.

Above all, this is a season and time of comfort and forgiveness to those who mourn, those needing to unburden themselves and seek to renew their lives, those who find themselves somehow mired in the confusion of 21st century life. As a young boy in my pastor father's Baptist Church, it was common for there to be what is often referred to as an 'altar call', whereby members would be encouraged to come forward and renew their lives. I remember always sort of cringing whenever this was done, because it seemed ostentatious and showy and needlessly dramatic--still does, to be honest--yet, once done, the sanctuary had a kind of cleansed feeling of release and relief. But what remains indelibly fixed in my memory are the words to the hymn which was sung as members made their way forward in penitence and prayer.

Allow me now to close by praying those words with you this morning:

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because Thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, Thy love unknown
Hath broken every barrier down;
Now, to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Amen