

Year B – Lent 3 – 04 March 2018
John 2:13-22

God's Graffiti

We've splashed our rules
All over the sanctuary walls . . .
So many rules we don't have time
For dancing . . .
Our graffiti
defiling the house of God.
God writes LOVE
upon our hearts.
Some night, let's sneak in the sanctuary
and paint over the rules
and write God's graffiti
all over the walls . . .
LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE

This poem by Ann Weems from Kneeling in Jerusalem, always makes me think of this morning's gospel passage from John. All these human decisions about what God's house should look like that essentially whitewash right over what God himself has created his home to look like. Who are we trying to impress? Who are we trying to *reach*? Are we on the right track or have we become seriously derailed somewhere along the line?

I remember the first time my parents came to visit me when we had moved into the rectory here. Since I knew that they were coming, I spent a good part of a week racing around the house like a whirling dervish trying to get everything spic and span, just to realize that no matter how much I cleaned, it seemed I could never have enough time to get it all sorted out. Rob was deployed, and I was on my own to get it all done. Some part of me wanted everything to be spotless before my mother came into our new home for the first time.

When I had myself right discombobulated it finally hit home what Rob had been emailing me all along. Would my mother want to see a house so perfectly clean and tidy that it looked like no one lived there? Or would she prefer to see the evidence of a family in their new home, a home that was comfortable and happy? When I finally gave my head a shake I realized that what I needed to focus on wasn't what the place looked like and whether it was perfect, but the fact that my parents were coming to visit a home, not just a house. I needed to make them feel welcome and comfortable, not scared of touching anything for fear they left a finger mark. In that week of insanity, I realized that the purpose of the dwelling is to have a place to make people comfortable and warm, not to prove anything about my ability to keep a home.

From what we have heard in John's gospel this morning, the scribes and Pharisees and temple priests had also experienced whirling dervish moments when they forgot what the true purpose of their spiritual home – the temple in Jerusalem – was really for. The temple was meant to be a place where the faithful could come to be closer to God's presence. It

was created by God in the first place as a physical reminder that the people had a God who watched over them and was accessible to them. The temple was the outward and visible sign of the covenant God had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that he would be their God and they, and their descendants, would be his people. Yet over the years some part of the original temple intention was lost in the human need to regulate who approaches God and how they approach him when they have received permission.

Similar to the trap I was falling into that long week before Thanksgiving in 2013, for the Jewish people, especially the priests and temple authorities, the temple had become a house of God, a showcase to the world of what the people were proud of, rather than maintaining it as the home of God in which people could be welcomed and feel closer to God, closer to his very presence. They had forgotten that the temple grew out of a covenant, and they had forgotten that the covenant was not just between them (the temple elite) and God, but between God and *all* of God's people.

The importance of covenant, specifically the covenant between God and God's people, is prominent in our scripture during our Lenten season. The basis of a covenant is important to understand as we search for the ways in which we are expected to be participants in the covenant God has made with us through Jesus Christ. A covenant in religious terms is an agreement between two parties that they will act in particular ways toward each other. Unlike a contract which can be broken if one of the parties does not fulfil their obligations, a religious covenant is a flexible and breathing document that is more interested in relationship than product or outcome.

For instance, when we hired someone to build the ramp for the Parish Hall we had a contract with them. If they failed to live up to the expectations of the job they had agreed to do, we could have fired them. If we had failed to make payments and supply them with what we contracted with them, they would have had the right to walk away – basically speaking. However, in a covenant, there is the underlying understanding that all of the parties involved are going to do more than simply adhere to the letter of the law. Members of a covenant will go out of their way to assist their covenantal partners to maintain the agreements and relationship. Even when one party fails in their role, there is an understanding that the covenant, and relationship, is still valid and in place.

We are a fortunate people that God did not strike a contract with Abraham or we wouldn't be here today. What God did do, was to invite Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob and the people of Jesus' day, and all of us, to enter into a covenant with God. And that covenant is a promise from God that he will love us and forgive us and welcome us back again and again. Our end of that covenant is that we will do our best not to break God's faith, not to break relationship with God, and if, and when we do, because we know we have and we will continue to from time to time, we will go back to God and ask forgiveness and enter back into full relationship with God. And, because of the covenant God made with Abraham, and re-covenanted through Jesus Christ, we know that we will always be welcome in that covenantal relationship with God, whenever we ask to be reunited with him.

A significant part of the covenant that we need to keep in mind is that God did not set any preconceived parameters around who could be invited into the covenant. God has opened

his arms to new relationships with whoever is willing to join him. And that is a great part of why today's gospel is so important to us in the 21st century Church.

Throughout Jesus' ministry he did not turn anyone away. He encouraged people to be honest with themselves about whether they were ready to follow him, but when they were he did all in his power to allow that to happen. So, when Jesus approached the temple on his first feast day after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness he was rightfully dismayed and angered that the one great place where people knew they could find his Father had turned into a series of hurdles and discouragements for people trying to hold up their end of the covenant that God had made with them so many generations before.

The selling of sacrificial beasts within the temple, the way people were treated who came to worship God, the base and unqualified desire to make money off the very people who just wanted to love God and show their love, angered Jesus because it caused people to stumble in their upholding of the covenant with his Father. Jesus saw this home of God, the temple which was a symbol of the Covenant between God and his people, turned into a marketplace of contracts and profit. The conduct of the people in and of the temple was preventing people from encountering the presence of God. And that was a defilement of the beauty of the relationship God had invited all of his children to participate in. Jesus' anger and the cleansing of the temple was in direct response of the temple insiders putting up barriers to people who wanted to come into relationship with God, and who were able to recognize that God would welcome them whoever they were.

As members of the Christian church of the 21st century, we need to be very careful of what we do and what our temple, or worship space, says to people when they enter. Do they see God's graffiti of LOVE painted all over the walls of our covenanted space? Or do they perceive rules and expectations on our sanctuary walls that would distract them from worshipping God with all their hearts, souls, minds and bodies?

God has invited us into covenant with him, by bringing us into relationship with him, and with all his people. Are we honouring that covenant both by loving God and *all others*? Or is God holding the covenant for us as he waits for us to stop running around creating the perfect house, so that we can recognize that he has given us, and the strangers who will come to join us, a welcoming, open and gentle home? A home where God is host and guest of honour all at the same time.