

Weekly Reading – Monday, March 9, 2009

We're looking now at the lessons for Lent III, which is Sunday, March 15, 2009. I mentioned last week the frame that churches doing catechesis use for the gospel lessons of this week and the next: "We confess our thirst for Christ and for the work of God in our lives." I guess if we're going to experience living water, we first need to be spiritually thirsty and know that we are. Another theme emerging from all three lessons is "The Holiness of God."

Exodus 20: 1 - 17

The Ten Commandments, or as my friend the biblical scholar Rob Wall prefers, "The Ten Words," that drawn from the "Decalogue." The point of "The Ten Words" designation in contrast to the "Ten Commandments" is to keep the focus on God who speaks the words and on relationship with God. Too often the Ten Commandments float free of that relationship and the God who speak these words that we may have life in relationship with God and others. They become rules without relational context. It's worthwhile to remind ourselves of the division of the two tablets. The first tablet, or the first four commandments, have to do with our relationship with God, while the second tablet, and the last five, with our relationship with our neighbors. Thus, the whole Decalogue is captured by what Jesus spoke of as the great commandment, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength," (the first four) "and to love your neighbor as yourself" (the last five). The hinge commandment, so to speak, is the fifth, "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." So the progression is: God, family, neighbors/ community.

Moreover, love of neighbor is rooted in love of, and the holiness of, God. Reverence for God and reverence for others are two parts of one whole. I once had a man in a congregation who drew everything back to the 10 Commandments, saying, "If everyone just kept these everything would be fine, don't you agree?" The danger in such reductionism is that the narrative context of the Decalogue is lost. These words are intended to define the shape of life for those who have known God's liberating grace. They suggest the contours of our response to grace. Apart from that context of grace, they run risk of becoming rule by which, see gospel text, we manage our relationship with God.

I Corinthians 1: 18 - 25

A wonderful, and demanding, series of verses from Paul. Keep in the mind the overall context in I Corinthians where Paul addressed a factionalized congregation and in particular people who thought of themselves as "the spiritually enlightened" or as "wise" and who looked down on those they regarded as "weak" or "unenlightened." Thus, later Paul will write, "Knowledge puffs up; love builds up." He says that all human attempts to know or grasp God by our own efforts and great wisdom, shatter against the cross. We don't figure out our way to faith; it is a revelation, revealed to us not figured out by us. It comes at us and it comes at us in a most unexpected form, the crucified Messiah. This, maintains Paul, will always be a hard sell with the wise, powerful, secure or self-righteous. But to those "who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Note that

the gospel is not simply an idea, it is power. Power to change lives. Perhaps the current shaking of the economic foundations will leave some of us formerly secure/ complacent people less so and more open to the strange wisdom of God? "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." Kind of a midrash on Isaiah's "God's ways are not our ways." Again, the holiness of God.

John 2: 13 - 22

It's important to note the location in John of this story of the cleansing of the Temple. In the other, synoptic, gospels this act comes at the end, the straw that broke the camel's back. In John it comes early, which is to say that it serves a programmatic function in the Fourth Gospel. That is, it reveals Jesus' program, so to speak, at least as John depicts it. And what is that "program?" First, what it is not. The issue is not simply that business is being done in the Temple precincts, as if the problem were a violation of some line between spiritual and material. That's often how people understand the Temple cleansing, which kind of lets us off the hook, doesn't it. "We don't sell stuff in our sanctuary, lucky for us! We don't do all that old sacrificial stuff." No, the issue is a deeper one. The sacrificial system is a way of managing our relationship with God, who Jesus wishes us to see will not be managed or controlled. So we do our religious thing and imagine its all good. No, says Jesus, its not all good. The point is not to manage religion but to meet God. Part of the reduction of religion to managing the sacred is to confuse the Temple with the power and source to which it points. This is where Jesus is coming from in declaring, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The Temple is not itself the source of sacred power, it is the mysterious God, the God who will raise Jesus from the dead. So there is a contrast here between religion as our human activity, rituals and systems, and religion as being in the presence of God whom we cannot manage or control. In the presence of the God the only right response is repentance. Jesus tells his audience that by being in his presence they are in God's presence. Do we thirst for God's presence and power in our lives or do we settle for religion/ church as a busy or successful institution? Too often when people have been hungry for bread we have given the stone of a busy, successful institution. The point, Jesus says, is meeting and being met by the uncontrollable God whose ways are not our ways, whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.