

I remember when our children were in school, it was sometimes to deal with all the birthday parties they were invited to attend. Each invitation meant that we had to buy a gift, which sometimes was a real challenge. We tried to get a decent gift. Too often, though, it felt more like an obligation than a real gift. Over the years, there have been times when someone has surprised me with a very different kind of gift, a gift totally unexpected, offered because of friendship or love or appreciation, not obligation. I have experienced this kind of gift here, like the time last Fall y'all deluged me with lots of gift cards and the scarf and sweater, all reflective of your generosity. Other times: soup left for me, or a card, or a magazine or news article, or an understanding ear. These special, unexpected gifts make life rich and meaningful.

God is the best one for offering us life-giving gifts. God gives gifts, such as life and our abilities and forgiveness and hope and peace, not because we somehow deserve the gifts or have earned them, but because God wants to show us just how much God cares for us. God's gifts are always appropriate, always the right size, they never need to be exchanged. The problem with us is that too often we turn God's gifts around and make them burdens instead of gifts.

A good example of this is the commandments we read from the Old Testament today. The wandering tribe was asked to become monotheistic, to worship only the one true God. Their commitment to God was met with a gift by God, a code of life to guide and direct them as to how to be God's people. These ten commandments were a revolutionary new set of ideas for the time. They expressed as much concern for the other person as for the self, and showed that by expressing concern for one another and an openness to God everyone's life could be enhanced.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for this gift to become a burden. The idea of a sabbath day of rest soon became a day of prohibitions where one could be punished for the slightest infraction. The ideal of a loving, caring society was changed to "What is the least I can do and still fulfill the law? What is the minimum requirement?" By the time of the prophets, people were going to the temple to worship, taking large offerings and gifts, but totally ignoring the needs of the poor and of their neighbors. Religious requirements had lost meaning and the people too often moved through meaningless ritual. The gift had not only lost its original meaning but had become a means by which the people justified their greed and selfishness toward their fellow human beings.

There's an old story of a bank robber who, when he was being arrested by the police, was offered a cigarette. (This was years ago!) When the officer offered him a smoke, the robber said, "No thanks. I gave up smoking for Lent!" He may have given up smoking, but he didn't give up robbing folks! So Lent didn't really make much of a dent in the way the robber lived!

The gospel lesson for today has often been embraced by Christians as proof of Jesus' humanity, a time when he "hit the ceiling," so to speak, totally exasperated by the use of the Temple as a money-making enterprise. The temple authorities had set up money-changing tables to permit those coming to Jerusalem from various locales to observe Passover to convert their tender into

something acceptably pure for a temple offering. Human nature being what it is and was, the hands involved did more than simply exchange: they made huge profits in the process.

What had once been a source of joy and happiness for the people, a place where the people could be reminded of the source of their blessings and their obligations as God's people, had now become a center of commerce. What should have been holy and sacred for the people had become profane and an oppressor of the people. The idea that the gift God had given to the people was now being used to oppress the people was what made Jesus angry.

In writing this sermon, I thought about Jesus' anger, and the closest thing I could come to identifying with it is my rage over the mistreatment of animals and children, throughout the world but even here in our state. Horses starving in Stamford, children left in cold cars, elderly and young folks given little attention or love by those who ought to care the most. Your rage may be similar, or you may identify more with anger at politicians or banks or your oil company or drivers who seem to want to run you off the road. Most of us know deep anger, and usually it's about something that seems wrong, unjust.

The picture of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple has been used by Christians to justify our own angers, particularly if they seem righteous: "Hey, even Jesus got angry." But there is more for us to glean from this passage than permission to express anger.

The passage speaks of destruction. Characteristically, the gospel-writer John spoke on several levels at once. After Jesus had driven the profiteers out of the temple, the authorities demanded an explanation from him. He gave them a mysterious reply: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews scoffed, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?" Now of course we know, and the disciples later realized, that while Jesus may have been talking about the Temple structure itself, he was also talking about the Temple of his own body. For he would face destruction on the cross, and then would be restored to life on the third day. The authorities had no understanding of this at the time, but Jesus' destructive actions against the religious "system" ended up provoking them to plot his destruction.

The message of the gospel lesson seems to be this: The mission and ministry of Jesus, and any who would follow him, will sometimes be marked by destruction. The cost may be high for those who truly risk taking the stands they believe Jesus would take. But while destruction is to be found along the way of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection promise us that destruction is not the final word. Resurrection, restoration, forgiveness, new life -- these are the future for those who put their trust in Jesus.

Anyone who has ever remodeled a house knows that to bring forth something new there must be a fair measure of destruction. God's house was given the foundation of God's steady love for humanity, and it was laid out as a covenant, an agreement understandable by both parties: God would be the people's God; the people were to be God's people, following the commandments spelled out for them through Moses. The building plan was executed with care by God, but the

human side of the covenant was repeatedly broken... Even so, God kept struggling to get his people to return to him in faithfulness. But the people kept trusting in other things: themselves, the strength of the nations around them, and even the power and wealth they could amass as they sold things in the temple. Time and again, in order for God not to be mocked, judgment was necessary. But God kept persevering, forgiving the prodigal people and setting new possibilities before them. Finally, a new building was needed to replace the old.

In Jesus, *we* are asked to be part of God's Temple, still based on the foundation of God's love, but with walls upheld not simply by humanity's ability to keep up that side of the covenant or to follow the Ten Commandments. Now the building is girded with nothing less than the indestructible Body of Jesus... It is unbreakable now because it's already been broken and spat upon and deserted and betrayed and misunderstood and plotted against and tortured to the limits of humanity...The Temple was destroyed, but love and forgiveness prevailed. So we are called to be Christians and then are reconstructed painstakingly with nothing less than the mortar of Christ's own body, blood, and unending love and life. The reconstruction is a process, life-long. It involves a daily turning to God and placing decisions, time, energy, and abilities at God's disposal. When I was in college some of the Christians wore buttons proclaiming themselves to be "Under Construction." This image "fits."

All who believe Jesus to be the risen Lord are part of Christ's church, the Body of Christ, the new Temple. In this, God has chosen to build not with bricks and wood and precious metals, but instead with material much more challenging to mold and shape: human hearts, wills, and understandings. Three days, two thousand years, human life-times... God works to destroy our sin, to render it powerless by forgiving it; God's glory is to rebuild our failures to love through Jesus' refusal not to love...

That's what we're about today. We come to worship to offer God our thanks for life and to draw strength for living; but we also come to remind ourselves that we are part of an indestructible BODY, nothing less than the Temple of God.

Last week we shared the Communion meal. Someone once suggested that when Christians receive communion we should imagine that God is placing those portions of the sacrament - the bread and juice - in the most holy of holies: a special temple, our lives. We are the body of Christ. Christ dwells in us, works through us, and walks with us in our every moment. We walk through failure, we experience destruction and even death, but as it was for Jesus, God's love will see us through.

Thanks be to God! Amen.