

“Good Trouble” – Tim Hall

Sunday March 7, 2021 – 3 Lent, Year B

(Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22)

We began our lectionary readings this morning with the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on the mountain and shared with the Hebrews, the Israelites, in the desert. The desert where they have long been journeying to the Promised Land. It's appropriate to read and reread the Ten Commandments during Lent, a season of penitence and reflection and returning to the Lord.

Since we were bathed in ashes at the beginning of Lent, reminding us that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we've been on our own personal and corporate spiritual journey of introspection. A journey of introspection for ourselves, our families, our church, our country, our world. A journey that sometimes feels like an endless trek through the wilderness. But a journey that does lead, if we stay the course, to the Promised Land.

On the first Sunday of Lent, instead of an opening processional hymn, we instead knelt in our hearts and prayed together The Decalogue, where after each commandment was read we responded, “Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.” Good stuff to remember and to imprint into our hearts and our very souls. But I'm a bit ashamed to admit that I've often thought, “Why so negative?”

Fully seven of the ten commands are “shall nots”. Couldn't God have been a bit more positive in telling us how to live? It's like he's talking to a bunch of children... Oh, yeah, I guess that makes sense since we so often act like unruly children, acting out of selfishness, jealousy, anger, and so many other base human emotions that we try to overcome but so often fail to.

But then God has a change of heart. “Here, let me help you more clearly understand this”, he whispers to us. And as Jesus, God Incarnate, who walked among us in order to better understand us... when the Pharisees try to trick him by asking, “Which of the ten commandments is the greatest?”, he answers,

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And he gives us The Beatitudes. In these, the message Jesus shares is one of humility, charity, and brotherly love. He teaches transformation of the inner person. Love becomes the motivation for the Christian. Jesus presents the Beatitudes in a positive sense, virtues in life which will ultimately lead to reward.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.*

*Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure of heart,
for they shall see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God.*

*Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

And to make it even simpler, Jesus give us the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." See, he say, it's not that hard! Be nice to other people just as you would have them be nice to you. Help others, as you would have them help you. Comfort others. Love others, even your enemies. Be merciful. Be pure in heart. Be a peacemaker. Good, positive words to live by. Maybe not that easy. Often a huge challenge. But doable.

So then, what's with Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning? After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, he goes to the temple to worship. And woe to you if you happen to be one of those doing business in the temple that morning, for Jesus overturns their tables, opens cages setting animals free, and, with whip in hand, drives them all from the temple. How often have you heard someone say in an attempt to justify their own reaction to something or someone, "Well, even Jesus got angry," referring to this exchange between Jesus and the money changers.

Is this how Jesus would want to be treated? Is he showing mercy? Being a peacemaker? ... Perhaps he is being pure of heart. For you see, anger may arise from many human emotions, from fear, or guilt, or even grief. I think Jesus is just so overwhelmed by grief at what he sees going on in the LORD's house that he can't contain himself.

Where do you see yourself in this scene? Are you one of the merchants, conducting business in the temple? Are you a bystander, just trying to make your way to worship? Are you a disciple, following Jesus into the temple and then shocked by what you see transpire? Are you a Pharisee, observing this commotion above the fray and then questioning Jesus' reason for doing this?

Wherever you see yourself in this scene, and it could be in different roles at different times, it's important to ask ourselves, "Wait a minute. Would Jesus throw tables around in our Parish Hall if he showed up on any given Sunday?" Surely not. Surely we as individuals and as part of our parish are not involved in this kind of behavior, right? But we really need to examine ourselves. Can we accept that we've chosen to be blind to the complicity of our own actions which sometimes mirror those of the people who were driven out of the Temple by a raging Jesus?

This passage from John offers us an opportunity to look at the way in which we conduct ourselves as Godly people. Do we really know Jesus? Have we just read the first few lines of each chapter and then glossed over the middle, to the end, where we rejoice in Christ's triumphant resurrection? Can we see areas in which our present actions shadow those of generations past? The acts of driving out the people, the proclamation of the Temple's destruction, and the promise of its rebuilding can still serve as not-so-gentle reminders that we still have work to do.

We are constantly reminded of the brokenness of this world. We see images of fear, suffering, and injustice daily.

If we were victims of one of the many horrific wars, skirmishes, kidnappings, and genocide that plague our world, how would we hope to be treated by those who care?

If we lived in dread fear of being deported from this, the only country we've ever known, to a country consumed in violence and unknown to us, or if we were just trying to escape from that violent country to a land with more promise of peace and opportunity, how would we hope to be treated by those who care?

If we knew or loved someone that died in one of the many mass shootings that continue to torment our nation, or if our family had to bear the loss of a loved one to the pandemic or racial injustice or a terrible natural disaster, how would we hope to be treated by those who care?

Sometimes the grief is almost unbearable. And besides making me sad, it makes me angry, too. How can we continue to treat all this brokenness as the status quo? It's not enough to offer "thoughts and prayers". We need to overturn a few tables, metaphorically speaking, in the process of doing the work we still have to do... to help to bring to realization God's kingdom here on earth in our time.

As the apostle Paul urges us this morning, we need to be Fools for Christ. Others may see the cross as foolishness, but we see it as salvation. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Let's take the Ten Commandments to heart. And the Beatitudes. And the first and greatest commandment as proclaimed by Jesus, and the second which is like unto it. And the Golden Rule. And with righteous anger, "good trouble" as our dearly departed John Lewis called it, tempered with love for our neighbors, let us act as God's instruments for good in our time.

"Do not get lost in a sea of despair," Lewis said. "Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

We may just see ourselves as one small person, one small congregation, but we can still make a difference if we but only take that first step. And then keep moving, working to bring the Kingdom of Heaven closer to being God's Kingdom here on earth. No matter how insignificant we may think ourselves, God and the world are still depending on us.

~ Amen