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Lent III
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There is so much information about the Gospel of John that I hardly know where to begin. This Gospel was written after the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, an event alluded to in today's reading. The Gospel of John was written after the Jews separated themselves from the Christians. Let me give you a piece of historical context. When the Jews were carted off into the Babylonian Exile, when it was not possible to offer sacrifices at a Temple, prayers and blessings were written to take the place of the sacrifices. What comes to mind is a Psalm that is used in the Evening Prayer service from our prayer book, "Let my prayers be set before you as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."

Now the Jews had returned to Palestine, re-establishing the offering of sacrifices in a sacred Temple setting. One of the requirements was the animal to be offered for sacrifice must be without a spot or a blemish. Traveling to Jerusalem, and going to the Temple, were major undertakings. The farther away you lived, the harder it was to bring your sacrificial animals to the Temple. They had to be certified in order to be used for sacrifice. It was harder to bring in an animal that could suffer all kinds of bangs and bruises, and you would have to carry the water and the food for the journey. And you'd have to keep an eye out, controlling the animal or bird so it doesn't take off, leaving you without your ritual sacrifice offering to God.

From this reality came the enterprising people who started offering animals for sale that were certified and in good shape. Beyond that statement, I have no historical information concerning the actual evolution of this practice. What I would sense is that it works like most enterprises in business.

First, a couple of guys decided that the few doves they have been raising could be sold for a bit of money by offering them as sacrificial animals outside the city gates. Slowly the idea grows; other people get prime spots for their little road-side stands, offering a variety of animals for varying sums. Then someone asks one of the priests if he can move into the area in front of the Temple. Later businesses start moving inside the Gentile Court. What starts out as a roadside stand turns into Walmart inside the walls. And people get used to the idea and it develops into an institution.

Then there was the Temple tax. It had to be paid in a certain currency. The farther away you lived, the harder it was to get local currency. If most of your business dealings were with the Romans, you'd get paid in Roman currency. People coming from all over, needing to pay taxes and get animals sacrificed, want to join in the rites and rituals and gatherings. The whole interaction, after a long journey on the road, was complicated and involved.

It seems to me, after reading several commentaries, that Jesus doesn't exactly accuse the businesses of stealing from the crowds or overcharging on the purchases. Rather, it seems that the intent and the focus of the transactions have taken away the reason for having this little trip to Jerusalem during the Passover Season. Their eyes are no longer on God.

We hear echoes of this when Thanksgiving is less about giving thanks and more about eating too much and watching football. Christmas is less about Christ and more about having more. The buying and selling adds up to an monetary figure that is so big I can't even get my head around it. As we will hear further into Lenten readings, Jesus insists that the focus be on God, prayer and our neighbors. And I feel the reproach of Jesus in this lesson.

Railing against this convenience industry for the offering of sacrifice and payment of tax sets the question before us, "Why are they and we here anyway?" This is a threatening Jesus who confronts us this morning. While Jesus is accepting and gentle almost to a fault with so many, quick to heal and often gentle in his approach, we tend to forget the confrontational Jesus who asks why we are here. It is the Jesus who rebukes his best friend, Simon Peter. He is the one who calls King Herod a fox, not a very endearing term. He is the one who gives the tree one more year and if it doesn't produce, pull it up.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about cheap grace in his work The Cost of Discipleship. He directly states that following Jesus is going to cost you something. This is a viewpoint that emphasizes that faith isn't easy, convenient or simplistic. While this faith can be comforting and supportive and uplifting, it isn't that alone. And not everyone who appears, who comes to see, becomes a believer. That is true in Jesus' time and ours. Content to follow Jesus while he was standing up to religious authorities and doing the miracles, many did not join this new faith expression in the post-

resurrection communities that were nestled within Judaism. When told to give up family, or wealth, or closely-held beliefs some of the people in the New Testament walked away from Jesus.

We need to check the courtyards around our hearts to see if we have set up institutions to keep God out of focus or at a distance. Lent is a good time to refocus, to take up a cross and follow, to recognize that a life of faith is not a life of ease. May God grant us both the wisdom and the strength to do this.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

After the Exile, these daily prayer services continued. In the 5th century [B.C.E.](#), the Men of the Great Assembly composed a basic prayer, covering just about everything you could want to pray about. This is the Shemoneh Esrei, which means "18" and refers to the 18 blessings originally contained within the prayer. It is also referred to as the Amidah (standing, because we stand while we recite it), or Tefilah (prayer, as in The Prayer, because it is the essence of all Jewish prayer). This prayer is the cornerstone of every Jewish service.

The blessings of the Shemoneh Esrei can be broken down into 3 groups: three blessings praising [G-d](#), thirteen making requests (forgiveness, redemption, health, prosperity, rain in its season, ingathering of exiles, etc.), and three expressing gratitude and taking leave. But wait! That's 19! And didn't I just say that this prayer is called 18?

One of the thirteen requests (the one against heretics) was added around the 2nd century [C.E.](#), in response to the growing threat of heresy (including Christianity, which was a Jewish sect at the time), but at that time, the prayer was already commonly known as the Shemoneh Esrei, and the name stuck, even though there were now 19 blessings. Many non-Jews, upon hearing that there is a blessing like this, assume it is much more offensive than it actually is. Here is what it says:

For slanderers, may there be no hope; and may all wickedness quickly be destroyed, and may all your enemies be cut off swiftly. The intentional [sinners], swiftly may they be uprooted, broken, cast down and subdued, swiftly and in our days. Blessed are you, L-RD, breaker of enemies and subduer of intentional [sinners].

