



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Lent 3 (B)

#### Sacred Spaces

[RCL] Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

In 2008, in Jerusalem, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a fistfight broke out between Greek and Armenian monks. The church is the traditional site of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Here's the BBC report: "Israeli police had to restore order at one of Christianity's holiest sites after a mass brawl broke out between monks in Jerusalem's Old City. Fighting erupted between Greek Orthodox and Armenian monks at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre... Two monks from each side were detained as dozens of worshippers traded kicks and punches at the shrine, said police. Trouble flared as Armenians prepared to mark the annual Feast of the Cross. Shocked pilgrims looked on as decorations and tapestries were toppled during Sunday's clash. Dressed in the vestments of the Greek Orthodox and Armenian denominations, rival monks threw punches and anything they could lay their hands on. The Greeks blamed the Armenians for not recognizing their rights inside the holy site, while the Armenians said the Greeks had violated one of their traditional ceremonies."

This is sad. And it is not the first time rival religious orders have fought in the church. It also seems a bit like Monty Python. But is it really so surprising? On the one hand, yes, monks brawling with each other seems an outrage, a violation of their vocation. But on the other hand, it's not all that surprising. Because when it comes to holy sites, the conditions are ripe for conflict. Sacred spaces, all too often, are contested spaces, places where rivals fight for access, control, and the power and prestige that come from these things.

Sacred spaces are places where worshippers feel especially close to God, places where they feel they can communicate with God, through worship, ritual, and other types of prayer. As places where heaven and earth meet, where God is made manifest, sacred spaces attract people who seek blessing, healing, and forgiveness. So sacred spaces attract lots of people. Think here not only of well-known pilgrimage sites like Lourdes but also of the recent popularity of pilgrimages like the Camino de Santiago, where all types of people, religious and not-so-religious, seek to connect with something sacred or holy. People flock to places that promise blessing, healing, purpose. But this also creates a problem because sacred spaces are also especially vulnerable to desecration. Think of the visceral reaction people had when Michelangelo's *Pieta* was attacked by a man with a hammer or when a synagogue is vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti. These defacements feel like more than simple acts of vandalism. They feel like a desecration.

So, given the risk of desecration, sacred spaces usually undergo a process of regulation. Boundaries are set, entrance rules are defined, appropriate behavior is prescribed. And this regulation generates things like buildings and religious officials to protect the sacred from defilement. And while this regulation may protect the holy site from desecration, it also creates the conditions for conflict. Think again of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where you have at least six religious groups who claim rights over parts of the church. In a situation like this, it's not that surprising that even normally mild-mannered monks may be itching for a fight.

The temple in Jerusalem is, in many ways, the quintessential sacred place. In ancient Israel, it was thought to be the place where the special presence of God dwelled on earth. Hence its name: "House of Yahweh." As Solomon says, he built God a dwelling place, a home where God will live forever. But even though the temple was the center of Israelite life, because of its very sacredness, the general Populus had access only to its outer courts. Even the clergy did not circulate freely within the building, and the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, was off limits to all but the chief priest, and to him only on one day a year. Still, at festival times, pilgrims would flock to Jerusalem and to the precincts of the temple to come close to the dwelling place of God, to bring offerings and to receive blessings.

In Jesus' day, the temple was ripe for conflict. Many thought the entire temple establishment corrupt. The Essenes thought it so corrupt that they fled to the banks of the Dead Sea in order to establish a new priestly community. The story of Jesus cleansing the temple fits into this conflict-ridden situation. The time is Passover. Pilgrims filled the city. Apparently, in the courts of the temple, people were making a living by selling animals for sacrifice and by changing Roman coins into Jewish coins for the payment of temple taxes. Jesus is not pleased. He drives out the large animals with a whip of cords, he overturns the moneychanger's tables, and he tells those selling the doves to take them away and to stop making his Father's house a marketplace. Jesus sees a crass moneymaking corrupting the temple. The irony here is the all too familiar story of the regulations that were set up to protect the holiness of the sacred place becoming the very means by which the temple is desecrated.

However, in our Gospel, Jesus is doing something more radical than simply cleansing the temple. In John's Gospel, something deeper is always going on. In this case, Jesus is not only cleansing the temple but he is also replacing it. Notice: Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The authorities say in response, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. Jesus is saying that, from now on, the dwelling place of God is to be found in his person. An upraised mortal body will replace an edifice of stone. What the temple had been in Israelite life, Christ himself will be for the Christian community. By his death and resurrection, he becomes the focal point of God's presence on earth. God's presence in the world is no longer identified with a place but with a person.

Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, is now the quintessential sacred space, the place where heaven and earth meet. The temple on Mt. Zion is replaced by the cross on Mt. Calvary, for when Jesus is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. And like other holy places, people will draw near to the cross so that they can communicate with God, and experience the presence, blessing, and mercy of God. The place at the center of the world is now the foot of the cross.

But there is also an extraordinary reversal in the way sacred space works when it is centered in the person of Jesus. Remember the worry that sacred spaces are vulnerable to desecration? Because of that worry, the regulations begin: boundaries are set, entrance rules are defined, behavior is prescribed. And, indeed, some folks tried to protect Jesus from defilement and criticized him for eating with sinners and tax collectors. They thought, like many people at the time, that impurity was contagious. But it turns out, in Jesus' case, it's actually the opposite. When sinners come into contact with Jesus, he is not infected by their impurity; rather, they are healed by his holiness. It wouldn't be too strong to say that the holiness that resides in Jesus is contagious. This means the whole notion of desecration is flipped on its head. Jesus doesn't try to regulate who has access to his holiness. Rather, Jesus says, "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." Jesus pours himself out for the sins of the whole world. Everyone is invited into his holy presence: saints and sinners, Jews and Gentiles, men, women, and children, the whole groaning creation. This is an awesome vision that transforms how we know and experience the holy presence of God.

Now, there are, indeed, appropriate ways in which we try to honor the presence of Christ in our midst. We stand for the reading of the Gospel. We reverence the altar. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. But woe unto us, when any of our practices causes a soul to stumble on its journey to Christ. A bunch of monks having a punch up in Jerusalem may not be all that surprising given the dynamics of sacred space and human sinfulness. But in a church dedicated to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, it is farcical at best.

Joseph Pagano, the author of this sermon, has been to the Church of Holy Sepulcher once. He was on a trip to Israel focused on politics, so he didn't plan to take in many of the spiritual sites. But one morning, trip members had some free time, and a few wanted to visit the church. Others warned them. They said it would be crass and crowded. There would be rival religious groups and tourists shuffling past each other in an atmosphere of thinly veiled hostility. There would be long lines of people, sweaty and smelly, pushing and shoving to get near the important sites. In short, don't expect it to be a very holy experience.

And they were right. It was a mess. Rival tour guides and groups jockeyed for positions. Members of different religious orders scurried about, glaring at one another. Mobs of people speaking dozens of languages surrounded him. And yet, as he stood in line, shuffling toward the traditional site of Jesus's crucifixion, he began to weep. He felt that, somehow, here, in the midst of all these people—the devout, the curious, the indifferent—our Lord was present. When Jesus was on the cross, he was flanked by sinners, mocked by soldiers, jeered at by passers-by. How like Christ, not to seal himself off in the inner

sanctum of some temple, but rather to be amid this press of human flesh. How desperately God must love us, he thought, recalling a phrase from a Graham Greene story, “to put Himself at the mercy of men who hardly knew the meaning of the word.” How desperately God must love us to replace an edifice of stone with a mortal body, to dwell no longer in a place but in a person. How desperately God must love us, to pour out his life for the sins of the whole world, for saints, sinners, and even brawling monks. How desperately he must love us to draw all people to himself, even as a murderous humanity lifted him high upon the cross.

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