

Jesus is in the Bread

By: Keith Holste

March 8, 2015. We're tempted to fall into thinking that our relationship with God is something that we earn. But we know better. We know that God has come to us and given us not only the wonderful gifts of creation, but also the great gift of Jesus. Pastor Keith preaches today on the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. Jesus' body is the new temple, he is with us, and we receive him in the bread.

*** Transcript ***

On this weekend if we note the 50th anniversary of the march in Selma, Alabama, we know that that first march was met with high resistance — and that further attempts led finally to the completion of the march to Montgomery, and that changes eventually came in the voter rights that the people were seeking. But even though that march was 50 years ago, we hear from today's lesson how prophetic protests in public places are not very new.

We know from the Old Testament that prophets like Jeremiah did public actions to bring attention to the waywardness of the people of Israel. And today we hear of Jesus as a protester. Jesus comes to the most visible place in the country — the temple grounds in Jerusalem at the season of high festival — and overturns the tables of the money changers, and drives out all the animals that they had there. And he speaks about this too. At Passover time, these are very critical things to have going on: you needed to have the sheep there to have the proper sacrifices for Passover. And the rule was that you needed to change your money from impure Roman money to the right kind of money to be acceptable in the temple, to make the exchange, so you could buy your sheep, so you could have your sacrifice. So, both these things that were going on were important to keep the Jewish festival in this holiest of Jewish places.

Yet Jesus disrupts both of these things at the highest time of the year. He criticizes deeply what's going on and what they're doing, and announces that he is the key to a new way of relating to God, a new way of worship, and a new way of community. To make the point about Jesus is about new beginnings, the gospel writer John puts this at the beginning of his gospel. It's already in Chapter 2 of the Gospel of John. Jesus has only done one miracle before this: changing the water to wine at a wedding. In the other gospels this incident is at the end pretty much of Jesus' life, as it's the thing that really gets people angry so that they want to kill him and crucify him. John wants his readers to know from the beginning that Jesus is about new things, doing things in a new way. The changing of water to wine right before this shows that Jesus can do greater things. They were using ordinary water, but he changes that water into wine, showing the extravagance of God's love, and how he brings better quality to things. And the water that they're using for purification at this point, he says we can do better than that. He says, there's something greater than their purification rite. It has to do with the wine. And the criticism and the challenging the ways of the temple, along with his statements about who he is as the new temple himself, moves all this ahead dramatically. Times were changing. It's a new beginning. Everything is new with Jesus.

Well, to look at the challenges and then the replacements that Jesus offers, let's kind of divide this into three things. First, it is the trading that's going on in the temple grounds. Here in John's gospel, Jesus doesn't criticize the morality of the people saying that they're cheaters or anything like that. What he's objecting to is the religious system and the temple system that reduces the high holy days to matters of doing the right things with money and animals to satisfy God. This turns a relationship with God into

kind of a bartering process. It's something that you do to try to stay on God's good side, rather than to be in a loving relationship with God, realizing that all good things come from God and that God is extravagant in giving good things. It's about responding. It's supposed to be about responding and thanksgiving and gratefulness, rather than being a time to try to earn favor with God. Well, this tendency is something that has continued through the ages and continues even into our time. We're so tempted always to fall into this thinking that our relationship with God is something that we earn, it's about earning a place, being good enough so that God will regard us well. We know better. We know that God has come to us and given us not only the wonderful gifts of creation, but also the great gift of Jesus. As Jesus says, Jesus is the new temple. And he brings with that the new way of doing things, the gift to us of his raised body and the promise of life with God is a most wonderful thing that is promised to us. All this comes with Jesus. And just like the wine is way better than the water, so Jesus is way better than the temple system that was there before.

But we know how tempting it is to fall back into this kind of bartering system with God, this marketplace idea. And it's tempting for us and it was tempting in Luther's day too. We know that Luther began to see that the church in his day was kind of in this barter relationship with God. He saw people around him literally paying money to the church to be given the promise of the forgiveness of sins. So he wrote and put up a written protest on (we might call the Facebook of the day) the church door, to tell people this wasn't right. He'd seen enough of this bartering. He lived through it, you might say in himself and the monastery, where he would punish his body at night. He did excruciating things to his body to try to earn favor with God, because that was the prevailing theology of the day. But then he realized in his studies that the Bible was telling of a different way, the way of grace and God's love and God's receiving people to himself. But we know how easy it is to bring that marketplace economy into our own thinking too. And sometimes in this Lenten season, we're most prone to that. We think in terms of giving things up so that God will like us more. We know that there are ways, good ways, to think about that, to give things up, and to be more disciplined in this season so that we can think more about God's goodness to us. Or somehow have a deeper relationship with God. Or maybe strengthen our relationships with other people in the world. They're all good things we can do in Lent as we give things up. But it's part of our human nature, to think that if I'm doing these good things, or if I'm giving this thing up, God likes me more.

Some of you may know a friend of mine Steve Albertin, who is a pastor in metro Indianapolis and has some relationships with this congregation, and happens to be serving a congregation in Zionsville (but in the Indianapolis area) called Christ Lutheran Church too. I've never seen them, but he tells me in this congregation that they have T-shirts for their Christ Lutheran Church that say, "Christ Lutheran, where you get to..." They are adamant in making the point that our good deeds are not what we do to earn God's favor, but what we do in our joy because God has favored us with the love of Jesus. So we *get* to do all kinds of things. And it's interesting, on his Church website you can get to a whole sheet of about 10 or 12 things — things we get to do at Christ Lutheran in Zionsville. It's much more of a joy and privilege to serve the Lord than it is to see it as a duty that we do for God's favor.

The second thing we learn from Jesus' protest of what was going on in the temple is that what is central is he, not the temple. It's widely thought that when John wrote these words, the temple had already been destroyed by the Romans. So the first hearers of the Gospel of John probably would have said yeah, the temple is gone and now Jesus, the new temple, has risen — and what is important is to worship him. And that's probably part of the reason why John writes these words the way he does. As I said to the children, Jesus is everywhere and not localized at any one place. And so the Christian church needed to hear this word. They could be okay without the temple. Because wherever Jesus was, wherever they were together in Jesus' name, there God was. On Ascension day, that's the main thing

that we celebrate: that Jesus has ascended to heaven so that he can be everywhere, with everyone in the world. And he says wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. So, our presence around him is what makes us be in worship — not to be in any certain building. Churches can be handy. They can even be inspiring (church buildings that is) but they aren't the main thing about our relationship with God. Jesus says that as the one in Jerusalem will be demolished, what raises in its place is his body. And that's what's important.

The third thing we learn from this protest of Jesus about the temple is that even as the temple was the main place for the Jews to gather, to come together on holy days, Jesus now says we gather about him. We call ourselves as a church. We say we're the body of Christ. His body is risen, and we are his body as well, as we call ourselves the body of Christ. As we are gathered about his word, as we receive his meal together, as we are baptized in his name, we're in union with him. We're one with him and with one another. We can hold hands with one another, saying we're all together in him.

It's widely thought that many Jewish groups in older days would all face the direction of Jerusalem when they worshipped together, much like the Muslims do today when they face Mecca when they pray together. But for Jesus there is no one holy place. He is the Holy One, and where people gather in his name, that's a holy place for those people. Because he is there. The community of people gathered about him is the important thing — not the place, not the building where that occurs.

You may have seen in yesterday's Post Dispatch a front-page article about Sister Antona Ebo. Fifty years ago she was working as a nun at St. Mary's Infirmery for the African Americans in St. Louis, and she was asked to be part of a delegation from St. Louis that would go down to Selma, Alabama to the second march, following the Bloody Sunday march. And she did so. She went with them. She's now 90 years old, and she was telling about that experience in the article. But she also tells in the article about her childhood growing up in Bloomington, Illinois. Her mother died when she was very young, so she was placed in the McLean County Home For Colored Children in Bloomington, along with her brother and her sister, at a very young age. Her family had been raised Baptist, and that was her religion. But she met a boy who was Roman Catholic in this children's home. But he couldn't exercise his Catholicism because they forbade him from going to the Catholic Church. But one day she and he were out and there was a Catholic church open. So they snuck into the Catholic Church themselves, and she listened as this boy told her the Catholic faith and doctrine, including the phrase that she remembered: Jesus is in the bread. She was taken by this and became a Catholic herself, she says because of this theology of the Eucharist. When she was 18 she converted to Catholicism. In the 1950s she became one of the Franciscan sisters of St. Mary. She continues to be active and will be leading a vigil on Tuesday sometime in Ferguson. But what I want to highlight from this very short biography is the life-changing lesson she learned from that boy who was with her: Jesus is in the bread.

Jesus says in our text that his body is the new temple. We also know that he gives us his body, in the bread of the Eucharist. When we receive him in our communities of faith, we're with him in a new temple. He's with us, and we receive him in the bread. We're all together in him. He is in our midst as we're gathered around his word, and sometimes we highlight that — on Easter and other special Sundays, when we read the word out in the middle of the congregation, to say we're all gathered about him. He is the center. Wood and masonry are nice, but gathered around him is the important thing. Jesus said the temple had become the marketplace. In his body religion is restored. It becomes a gathering of people, gathered about him in thanksgiving, receiving him with joy in the bread, and going forth then to share the word about him and to share him in deeds with other people. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ

Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2015, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Keith Holste, John 2:13-22