

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 3-B; 4 March 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Doing the Unstuck

In nomine...

I. Field Ed

This weekend several of us attended the annual Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey. At convention we do the business of the Diocese, but for many of us, that's not why we go. Convention is a big, annual family reunion. We see old friends and make new ones. I love going to convention. One of the first people I ran into this year was St. Thomas' very own postulant for Holy Orders, Ken Carpinelli. Ken is presently serving at St. Peter's, Medford, as part of his formation for the Diaconate. When I followed that same path, serving for a season in a parish apart from the one that had sponsored me for ordination, we called it "Field Education." My Field Ed was at a lovely parish, full of warm, loving, dedicated Christians. The fact that they also hosted a Hispanic congregation was icing on the cake: I loved participating with both churches that met in that space.

But my Field Ed parish, like all churches, had its issues. The worship space was beautiful, but money was tight and things kept breaking. The choir was small and the organ required lots of maintenance. Leadership of the parish rotated around a small, dedicated core because there was no one else to do it. All-in-all I encountered there a sense of frustration and resignation.

The thing which made me most sad at my Field Ed parish was the lack of any children's programming. They said they wanted to grow, and they did their best to welcome the young families who would float through our worship services, visiting once or even twice before moving on. But there were no offerings to communicate that their children were welcome here, that we took children's formation seriously, that we had the dedication to help these young families to raise their children in the love and knowledge of Christ. So families would visit, and then they would move on to look for another church that showed its concerns for their children in more tangible ways.

My Field Ed parish reported one thing, that they wanted to attract young families and to grow larger. But they lived out something different: that there was no energy to do the work that would be the basic foundation of that growth. They were tired. They found other things to do and other things to argue about. And nothing changed. They were stuck.

II. The Temple

In today's reading, Jesus encounters another religious institution that is stuck. The holidays are here, lots of pilgrims have come to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer the prescribed sacrifices, and there are vendors who have come to provide for the needs of these pilgrims.

The vendors didn't appear out of nowhere simply to fleece the faithful. There was a need to provide sacrificial animals and approved coinage for the pilgrims who had come from afar. But as these shop-keepers plied their trade, the tension between serving pilgrims and preserving the sanctity of the Temple was lost. Purpose was traded for convenience and it was easier just to let it happen than to push back. Tables for commerce were set up in the very precincts of the Temple.

Jesus is among those in town for the holidays. But Jesus doesn't appreciate the services the vendors are providing. The tables trespass on the prayers of the people. So Jesus makes a whip and drives out the animals being offered for sale. He overturns the tables of the money-changers and scatters their coins on the floor. Jesus admonishes those who would do business there that the Temple is a place for prayer, not for buying and selling and haggling.

Imagine the scene! If it was busy and noisy before, what was it like when there was money scattered on the floor, people scrambling to pick it up, animals running every which way, leaving feathers, and dung in their wake, and Jesus knocking over tables and brandishing a whip?

This is not the gentle Jesus of modern western cultural Christianity. It is not the Jesus with blue eyes and flowing locks, staring off into space. Nor is it a tame, demure houseguest. Jesus is a rowdy guest who spoke his mind and acted on it, offending people and making demands on those who would protect the status quo. Jesus shakes things up. Jesus is determined to make a mess if that is what it takes to bring some change to the Temple in Jerusalem. He does not want

to leave the Temple and its people stuck in the place they have been. The Temple has a bigger purpose than making profits and servicing ritual needs. Those tables have got to go. The Temple was meant to be a place in which to encounter God!

III. St. Thomas'

The danger of reading Gospel texts is that they're never just about some other place or time. We read the Gospel not primarily to learn about history, what did Jesus do in some building that no longer exists way over on the other side of the world. Instead, we read about what Jesus did then, so that we can learn to recognize what Jesus is doing now.

As I have gotten to visit with several of you during the "Meet & Greets" set up by Eric Cephas, one of the most prominent themes has been the desire of St. Thomas' to grow. This was clearly stated in St. Thomas' parish profile and by the committees that met with me before I was called to be your Rector. St. Thomas' wants to share God's love with more people, and we are particularly attracted to the energy that comes from young families. That's great! But what is standing in the way, like vendors' tables in the Temple courts?

When new people walk into St. Thomas', do they immediately walk into a house of prayer, or do they have to navigate through a maze of tables first? What do they see when they look at our grounds? What do they find inside our buildings? I know many of you, from Linda and Carlene to Debbie to Joe to the Tuesday night work crew, have put a lot of effort into making our campus a more beautiful place to be. How can the rest of us continue to encourage, support, and assist them in their efforts to push a few tables, both metaphorical and literal, out of the way?

When new people come in to worship with us on a Sunday morning, do they immediately find a pew, not at the front, that is big enough to seat their entire family? Do they get the sense that there is plenty of space for them to join us? Or do they immediately see a church which has no space for them and by which they feel embarrassed at the commotion it takes to find them seats?

When people visit our church for the first several times, do we reach out and help them navigate the various books we use in worship? Those books and our practice of worship can be difficult for people to navigate unless we are very intentional and pro-active about helping them.

When new people visit our worship services, do we escort them personally over to coffee hour and introduce them to others? There's a statistic floating around, which makes a lot of sense, that says the most accurate predictor of whether a visiting individual or family will come back is whether they have made substantial connections with seven other people in the parish. If there are seven other people who would be likely to call them by name and welcome them back the next time they show up, they're much more likely to return. They find the courage to visit our church because they are looking for relationships! It is our job to do the connecting work, introducing visitors around, asking about who they are and helping them find connections to others in the parish.

Already many of you have discussed with me other ideas to help make St. Thomas' more attractive and more welcoming to those who might walk in our doors. Conversations are ongoing about finding a choir director, starting a Spanish service, using our property for community gardens that feed hungry people. We are talking about different activities to serve students from Rowan, that mission field on our doorstep! I invite more of these conversations! Let's talk, and then do! St. Thomas' is a parish that is pregnant to the point of bursting with possibilities, potential, and Holy Spirit power.

Jesus is knocking at the door of our church. Jesus' knock is not an invitation to safety and nostalgia. Jesus can be a rowdy and disruptive houseguest. Jesus knows which tables need to be kicked over at St. Thomas' in order to free us up to become that which God, in God's eternal joy, dreams for us to become. Jesus is not content to leave us stuck in the past. The past is God's testimony to us, God's sure promise, of even greater things ahead. How is God calling *you* to help carry St. Thomas' into God's preferred future?

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