Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Third Sunday in Lent

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JESUS, UPSETTER OF RELIGION John 2:13–25

 Other than the trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the overturning of the tables of the temple moneychangers is the only other event in the life of Jesus that is reported in all four gospels. This leads us to believe that it actually occurred, and that it is one of the most important events in Jesus’s entire ministry. In fact, many teachers of the Newer Testament believe that it was this one event that led to the death of Jesus. The temple authorities simply could not tolerate such an assault on the whole sacrificial system that supported the institution of the temple.

Jesus clearly had an issue with the sacrificial system of the Judaism of his day. Sacrificial practices had replaced the rule of compassion and need for a deep and abiding relationship with God. In John’s Gospel, when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples and issued a new commandment that we are to love one another as he loved us, he was signaling a basic transformation of religious life in his day.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke place the event of the overturning of the table of the temple moneychangers just before the trial and death of Jesus. But John places the event at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry. It is as if John wants us to know that Jesus is going to upset religion right from the beginning.

Jeff Jones, at the Leader’s Event a week ago, reminded us of Phyllis Tickle’s observation that in the history of religion, every five hundred years or so the religious community is so out of sync with the world that it must decide what it needs to keep and what it needs to jettison in order to be true to the Gospel. Phyllis Tickle is not the only one to have pointed to the destruction of the temple in the year 70 of the Common Era as a watershed event in the history of religion. It marked the rise of synagogue Judaism and the birth of Christianity. It is reported that Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple and in today’s reading from the Gospel of John he likened it to the destruction of his own body. The temple did not rise again from the ashes, but Jesus rose from the dead. In Jesus, something new entered into the life of the world.

Jesus upset the religion of his day. We could say that he replaced the religion of his time with the need for human beings to deepen their faith and trust in God’s leading in their lives. In order to do so, they would need to let go of major parts of the religion they had relied upon and embark on a new journey of faith.

 The question for us is this. In our own day, are we ourselves experiencing a watershed event in the life of the church? By now, you know me well enough that you can anticipate my response. My response is that yes, we are experiencing a time of great transition in the practice of our faith. We find that we now live in a multi-religious society and largely a secular one. Of course, in Hawai‘i, we have always known this. We have grown up with both Buddhism and Christianity, and to a lesser degree Judaism. But now we have many other religious expressions in our society, including Islam, Bahai, Unity, and also a recovery of indigenous Hawaiian spiritual practices. Most people in our society, however, do not adhere to any one religious tradition. In our society, we are also experiencing more than ever before a distrust of institutions, both religious and political. The younger generations do not feel the same need to attach to institutions as in prior generations. And if they do belong to religious institutions, they are drawn to ones that often do not look like institutions, even though underneath all appearances they are.

 All of this leads to a familiar story: declining memberships in our mainline churches, financial concerns, an emphasis on the maintenance of church buildings, and a concern for institutional survival. There are five questions we keep asking that betray our concern for institutional survival. We ask: 1) How do we attract more members? 2) What’s the pastor’s job (which really means: Is it not the job of the pastor to “grow” the membership of the church?) 3) What is our vision and how do we implement it? 4) How should we structure ourselves? 5) What are we doing to meet the needs of all who might enter our doors? At the Leader’s Event, Jeff Jones suggested that we turn these questions around. Instead of a focus on attracting new members, perhaps instead we should be seeking ways to send our members our to serve the needs of the world. Instead of focusing on the job of the pastor, perhaps instead we should focus on our shared ministry, pastor and people together. Instead of developing and implementing a new vision, perhaps instead we should ask what God wills for the world. Instead of focusing on our survival and our structure as a church, perhaps we could seek to discover new ways of service in the church and in the world. Finally, instead of an emphasis on serving only the needs of our members, perhaps we should ask what we are doing to make the reign of God more present in this time and place.

 This is all food for thought. I like to imagine Jesus walking into our midst, and I wonder what he would say to us and ask us to do. Those questions are not bad ones to ask: What would Jesus say to us? What would Jesus ask us to do If he were the Jesus of John’s Gospel, he might say something like this: “Just to let you know: I did not come to establish a new religion, but that is what my followers have done. I came to deepen your relationship with God, and with me, and through us your relationship with one another. I came so that you might love the world as God, your Father, loves the world. I came to send you into the world to feed my sheep and tend my lambs, to care for them as God and I care for them. And yes, remember to wash each other’s feet and love one another as I have loved you.”

 My friends, may all we do in worship; may all of our music making and our singing; may all the words we speak and the prayers we pray serve to strengthen us to do what Jesus would ask us to do. Let us set aside our worries about our institutional survival. Let us not seek to return to the good old days in the life of the church, which were probably not that good in the first place. Let us do all we can to set aside all that is religiously unnecessary in our life together, and do all we can to deepen our believing in Jesus, which really means our faith in Jesus, and to place our trust in God’s leading in our lives and in the life of our church. Everything else let us leave in God’s hands, knowing that God will be with us and for us always. Thanks be to God. Amen.