

Blueprint

John 2:13-22

Exodus 20: 1-17

So, the Hebrew people spent 40 years on a trip that should have taken them no more than a week, tops. Along the way, they learned a lot about the providence of God; the failures of their leaders; and, perhaps more than anything, they learned what a challenge it is to build community with people who don't always see things the same way you do.

It wouldn't be very far fetched to say that God had had it with the Hebrews and their constant bickering and inability to get along, to live their corporate life reflecting what they should have known: that each person's well being is directly related to the well being of the others in their community. And so, God stepped in with a blueprint; directions for how to build human community.

Meanwhile, fast forward a few thousand years for another familiar story. Today in John's gospel we encounter Jesus causing quite a scene in the middle of the temple in Jerusalem: fashioning a whip out of cords, turning over the tables of the money changers, herding the animals for sale out of the temple and instructing the dove sellers to go somewhere else. He was

really, really angry—yelling about the sin of turning God’s house into a shopping mall and throwing around harsh words about the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days.

It’s interesting to note that, while all four gospels tell this story of Jesus getting angry in the temple, John’s account is unique. The other three Gospels put this story at the END of Jesus’ ministry, when he has returned to Jerusalem, when the situation is heating up for him, and when his trip to the cross seems inevitable. But not John—John puts this story right at the beginning of his account of Jesus’ life and ministry, in chapter two, right after Jesus’ first miracle, turning water into wine.

That’s curious positioning, isn’t it? I mean, I could see that maybe an outburst like this would have been understandable toward the end of Jesus’ ministry when the stress was getting to him, right?

It seems to me Jesus’ behavior here is less a depiction of his snapping after years of frustration...and perhaps more an expression of his flat out disgust. No matter where it happened in the story, I’m thinking that when Jesus walked into the temple that day he saw the gospel he came to preach, the highest hopes of God for God’s people, thoroughly distorted, a mutation of the original blueprints God designed for the best expression of what we can be together. And it just made him...mad.

It might help us understand Jesus' outrage if we know a little more about what exactly was going on in the temple the day Jesus walked in and staged his dramatic protest.

John tells us it was Passover. Passover is one of three major Jewish pilgrimage festivals, a high holy day for which observant Jews were instructed in the Torah to travel to the temple in Jerusalem. This meant that the city was packed with people who had come from all over, making the trip to spend this holy day in the holiest of places. It was a logistical problem that King Herod addressed by building a huge courtyard surrounding the temple, easing the congestion of what had become quite a lucrative holiday for business owners in Jerusalem.

Roman historian Josephus wrote that Passover visitors could number as many as two and a quarter million people, which made revenues from the holiday tremendous as the travelers had needs for food, lodging, animals for sacrifice, and the exchange of money for use in the temple.

You might imagine the scene: there were crowds everywhere; the air was festive and excited . . . everyone was working hard to get ready for the celebration. And the economic factors in play were intense: Passover was one time a year when merchants made a substantial percentage of their annual income.

One scholar summarizes the situation this way: Each attendee was responsible for a temple tax, which amounted to two days' wages. You couldn't use Roman money in the temple, so you'd have to make use of the moneychangers, who would exchange your Roman currency for temple shekels. Their cut was steep, though, coming in at about one day's wages. And, you'd need to bring animals to be sacrificed, which, if you bought the minimal sacrifice outside the temple (two unblemished doves), you'd be out two days' wages; some scholars say prices for animals inside the temple were inflated up to twelve times the outside price. After you had your animals for sacrifice you'd need to secure the services of a sacrifice inspector, who would charge you about half a day's wages. All in all, talking in modern terms, one scholar estimates that a day at the temple during Passover could cost about \$3,000—\$4,000 dollars.

What was intended as a holy time of worshipping God had been turned into something of a circus, and a lot of people were making a lot of money, most of it from people who could not afford to pay it. Exploitation of the poor is one thing, and egregious for sure. But exploitation of the poor in the name of God, imposed with a hard fist by the power of institutional religion . . . well, that's something even worse. It seemed to Jesus, I'd venture to say, that things in God's community had skidded out of control, way off

course, off the blueprint and maybe even off the drafting table on which the blueprint was laid.

And with that we turn again to the familiar Hebrew text from Exodus, where God offered a blueprint for human community. The thing is, we don't tend to think of the Ten Commandments like blueprints; culturally we see them more like rules. And we like to carve them into heavy pieces of stone and install them on the front lawn of the courthouse; make the kids in the Sunday School memorize them; use them as a checklist to measure ourselves—or, more often, each other, and then, if appropriate, use them as a stick with which to bludgeon each other.

And, this makes us, people of God, not models for what human community can be, but instead recipients of the charge of hypocrisy and, often, the laughingstock of those who watch us wallow in our own failure.

I recall one of Stephen Colbert's most viewed interviews, the one with Georgia Congressman Lynn Westmoreland. Westmoreland had gained some fame by proposing legislation that would require the posting of the 10 Commandments in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. What made the interview so famous, or infamous, was when Colbert asked the congressman to name the 10 commandments. It was with a great

deal of trouble that he came up with “Don’t murder, don’t lie, don’t steal.” And that was all he could remember of the list of rules he wanted to post publicly.

How shameful and embarrassing for us to use what God intended as a blueprint for human community, as a weapon for the exploitation and exclusion of folks who need so desperately to be included.

I suspect that’s exactly what made Jesus so mad that day in the temple. He was trying to communicate a message of transforming relationship with God in a place where institutional religion was holding sway on the people in ways that were oppressive, limiting, fear-filled, destructive.

Somewhere along the way somebody had lost the blueprints, plans that invited all of them and us to behavior like: loving your enemies, thinking of other people first, living with the radical love of God as your bottom line. Jesus was pretty sure God never intended for them to go around using what they’d turned into hard and fast rules as weapons for hurting each another. What they...and what we’ve... interpreted as prescriptive—do this or else, God intended as descriptive.

In other words, I imagine God means for us to hear the 10 Commandments a little like this: “Okay, Hebrews: I’ve brought you out of Egypt and here we are in the desert. You’re going to have

to figure out a way to live together in the kind of community that brings life and light to each other and to the world around you. I know you're tired from the big rush through the Red Sea, but sit down and let me describe to you a sort of blueprint for the kind of loving and lovely community I hope for you looks like: This is how we live together. We respect God; we honor one another. In our community we never bear false witness against each other; we don't kill each other—in spirit or in body. Instead, we'll share generously, building the kind of human community that mirrors God's gracious love for us!"

With the story of Jesus' protest in the temple ringing in our ears, I'm wondering this morning if we might not perhaps share his outrage at the church as society sees it today: a place that excludes and alienates people, that even thrives on deciding who is in and who is out, that sees decline and insists on clinging to the familiar instead of embracing a shifting future.

Somewhere along the way, like the temple in Jerusalem, we have veered off of the very blueprints God created for us. We have turned God's best hopes for humanity into institutions and ideologies that exploit and exclude, when we should be doing the work of building human community that shines like a model for the world around us.

There is no doubt that more often than not, we can't seem to even get close to what God hopes for us; we have so much work to do. So this morning let's hear again these commandments as blueprints, God's description of the kind of community we might build and nurture together if we could only remember the original plans.

Amen.