

3rd Lent B

Sacred Scripture tells us why the Temple in Jerusalem was built where it was. The Twenty First Chapter of the First Book of Chronicles speaks of a terrible plague that broke out in Israel killing over 70,000. As the plague approached Jerusalem, The Lord intervened and halted the plague at the farmer Onan's threshing floor. When King David witnessed the plague's demise, the Lord told him to build an altar on that spot, and the rest, as they say, is history.

But there is another story of how the Temple was built. This story comes from the Jewish Midrash or tradition of storytelling to transmit truth. Two brothers lived on either side of a tall hill. One brother farmed wheat and vegetables. The other brother herded sheep, selling the wool and meat.

One winter, a succession of severe storms isolated everyone and all attempts of travel or communication were futile. As time went on and roads opened for limited travel, the brother farming wheat and vegetables thought, "My brother and his family must be hungry and needing supplies of food. I will pack them some provisions and travel to his farm on the other side of the hill." At the same time, the other brother thought, "This winter surely must have depleted my brother's supply of meat; and the bitter cold requires more wool. I will pack some wool clothing and meat and travel to his farm on the other side of the hill."

Each brother set out simultaneously up the hill with needed supplies for the other. They both reached the hill's summit at the same time; catching sight of each other, immediately realized what each other was doing. They dropped their bundles, ran towards each other and without saying a word, embraced. And on the spot where the two brothers embraced, the Jewish people built their Temple in worship of the Lord.

In the passage from St. John's Gospel, Jesus visits the Temple, and his visits were rarely pleasant or approving. Rather, his Temple visits fill him with anger, outrage, and judgment. All four gospels report Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, and the driving out of the moneychangers. The Temple was the one place in all of Israel where God's presence was most intensely felt, and where worship was called to deepest devotion. Yet, Jesus sensed a terrible disconnect between worship in the Temple and the worship in daily life.

In St. Luke's Gospel, as Jesus witnesses the widow placing her last coin in the Temple treasury, he is furious with the religious leaders manipulating the poor and vulnerable for their scarce resources. In St. Matthew's Gospel, once the moneychangers are expelled, the blind and lame are drawn to him for healing. Were they intimidated from worship prior to Jesus' visit? In St. Mark's Gospel, Jesus expresses anger that the Temple is no longer a "house of prayer for all peoples."

If each evangelist shapes the Temple cleansing to speak to his own church in his time, they all concur on one reason for the Lord's fury. For the Lord, there was far too much commercialization in Temple worship, and too little worship in the commerce of daily life.

The fabled story of the two brothers suggests that the worship of daily life leads to a communal worship of ritual and prayer. Both brothers felt a zeal for the other that motivated them to action. As Jesus cleansed the Temple, the disciples recalled from Scripture, "Zeal for your house

will consume me.” There was too much zeal for markets in the Temple, and too little zeal for God in the marketplace. What zeal consumes us?

Jewish religious tradition was uncompromising in teaching that true worship of God was joined to the hip with the way we treat other people in daily life. The people of daily life included the family, the workplace, the synagogue, the village, the poor, the sick and abandoned, the stranger and those who were considered foreigners. The Old Testament prophets proclaimed God’s judgment on each person’s daily life and the community’s daily life by the way the poor, vulnerable, and stranger were treated.

There can be no separation from official worship in the Temple and worship of daily life. In the Midrash legend, the people built the Temple where the two brothers embraced only because their lives exhibited this unbreakable bond of loving worship. Both Law and prophets demand this as manifestations of love and justice.

Catholicism not only embraced this aspect of Jewish religious heritage, but at the Lord’s command, placed this tenet of love in the very center of our faith. In our Catholic faith, it is no longer in a Temple building where God is experienced with special intensity and intimacy. Instead, it is a gathering of God’s People baptized into the life of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. His Risen Body is now the place where full and complete worship of God takes place. His Risen Body is the place where God is experienced most intensely and intimately.

In his Risen Body, we encounter Jesus’ perfection of love for God, for all humanity and all creation. Worship within his Risen Body, particularly the Sacraments, deepens our love for God, our self and one another. We continually shed our self-interest and grow in deeper interest of “the other”, even the stranger who suffers and needs our assistance. This deepening love calls from within us a “zeal” that is meant to “consume us.” This “zeal” witnesses the many who are suffering, abandoned, excluded, oppressed, denied and cast off. This “zeal” acknowledges the injustice and “consumes” us to make a difference in our world through the faith we share with all God’s People.

Like the two brothers concerned for each other, we must express concern for those in need, both in our actions towards them, and in our advocacy for them. The Catholic faith expresses this truth in many images. One foundational image of this truth is “the common good.”

The Common Good reminds us that God is the creator of all that is visible. God also has provided enough created goods to supply the basic human necessities for each and every person that shares this planet. Everyone has a right to draw from the common good what is needed for a dignified and sufficient human life. Everyone also has the responsibility to contribute to the common good.

The Season of Lent focuses our attention on the catechumens preparing for the initiation sacraments at Easter. Beginning this week and for the following two Sundays, they will participate in scrutiny rituals. These rituals are more fully explained in your parish bulletins, and you are referred there for further information. We, the baptized and fellow parishioners are also called to accompany them on this journey of purification.

Can we say that God's basic command to provide for the common good is lived in our world, our country, our state, or even our own community? Can we say there is a "zeal that consumes" our society to provide for the basic needs of all people? Or is there basically "zeal to consume" for our own sake?

Lent is that particular time for purification of heart and soul. We need to ask ourselves the most basic questions. "What zeal consumes us?" "Are we aware of the sufferings of so many in our world today?" "Do these sufferings motivate us to a change of heart, transformation of lifestyle, a reordering of our priorities?" "How do we better connect worship within our parish community to the worship of our daily lives?"

Once we have begun the purification of our own heart and soul, our Catholic faith calls on us to ask these same questions of our society, community, state and nation. "What zeal consumes us as an American people?" "How do the rising numbers of poor people in our nation and in the world today affect our priorities as a people?" "What prophetic voices are calling us to be a holier people through our financial priorities?" "How are we as a Catholic people in the United States responsible for transforming our national heart and soul?"

Like the two brothers consumed with zeal for one another's needs, our growing zeal for others and our actions on their behalf might help others to recognize that this is the place where God needs to be worshipped.