

Whipping US into shape?

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March 9, 2009

Our gospel lesson comes just after the [story](#) of Jesus' first "sign": turning the gallons of water intended for purification rites into the wine that reveals his glory. This week's story features more contrast and conflict, this time centered on another key Jewish institution: the temple. Jesus doesn't like what he finds in the religion of his own people, and he is angry about the way this central piece of the people's heritage is being misused.

Jesus wants to bring something new: the new wine of God's gracious rule, new worship [in spirit and truth](#). In the theology of the Johannine community, Jesus himself, "[the temple of his body](#)," becomes the new locus of worship—but only after the resurrection do his disciples begin to understand this and believe.

In our postresurrection day, do we need a new cleansing of the temple? I get angry almost daily at the way my religion is misused by people claiming to represent it. Their marketing of Christianity makes me want to shout, "Get this stuff out of here! You are making a mockery of the faith of my mother and father." What is Lent about if not asking the hard questions, not of our neighbor's religion but of our own? Are we the new money changers, using our rules and traditions to create barriers between others and God?

It's hard for us to imagine Jesus cracking the whip over our heads and accusing us of turning his house into a marketplace. We might want to retort, "Who, us? We're only safe-guarding the holy treasures you gave us. You're the one who [told](#) us not to cast our pearls before swine."

The holy presence, embodied once in the temple and now in the risen Christ, is so important to Jesus that he is consumed with zeal for it. Can we use Lent to purify something in our lives that prevents others' access to that saving source of mercy? Do we hear Jesus telling us to "get this stuff out of here" for the sake of the salvation he wants to bring through us and in our midst?

The other texts can be read as reinforcing this theme of cleansing the temple of our own religion.

In Exodus, the first commandment urges us to worship God alone and no other gods. This includes the false religion we often fashion out of Christianity. No idols, says Yahweh: don't let any institution, tradition, book or place become an obstacle to the worship and service of the one true God (second commandment). False religion (which Jesus attacks in the temple) misuses the holy name of God (third commandment).

In the epistle, Paul critiques human wisdom, including *religious* wisdom, in favor of God's foolishness—the message of the cross. The power of God cleanses the temple of human pretension. We want everything to make sense to us, for God to answer all our questions, for religion to be reasonable. We want a sign or miracle, some tangible evidence of divine blessing, the healing of our 401(k)s—without which we reserve the right to withhold our belief that God exists.

To these demands for religion on our terms, God gives only the sign of the cross: the crucified Christ, who is utter foolishness to the movers and shakers of our day.

Psalm 19 presents the revelation of God's glory in the created order and in God's sweet word. The practical uses of this revelation of God are to see, listen and know; to be revived, becoming truly wise and enlightened and to be warned and rewarded. But the psalmist immediately senses the need for mercy and cleansing and for deliverance from hidden faults and prideful sins. The goal of this revelation and repentance is that all the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable to the Lord, our rock and our redeemer.