

Third Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

Exodus 20:1-17; 1Corinthians 2:13-25; and John 2:13-25

In a college course I taught on religion and culture, the class discussed loneliness and social media's role in it. Most students expressed weariness with the competitiveness that constant posting generated. They talked about FOMO (fear of missing out) as they watched friends engage in better activities than they were doing, as well as the despair that they had not been invited. However, when I asked them to practice the Sabbath by setting aside electronics for four hours, they could not do it.

This is a great example of the universal need to examine how our behaviors and values are out-of-sync with God's. Paul makes this point when he contrasts how Jews, Greeks and Christians view life's purpose. According to Paul, Jews valued apocalyptic signs, which displayed God's power; perhaps chafing under the yoke of Roman rule created a longing for the time when God broke into history to set them free. Greek culture valued philosophy and wisdom because the gods were distant and capricious; it framed all that was worthwhile in elegant arguments and rational structures. Christians, on the other hand, found God in self-sacrificing love. This vision of the divine made as little sense in Jewish and Greek cultures as it does in ours. Yet Paul confidently declares the truth of it: "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

The Third Sunday of Lent pokes at us: do we align our behavior and our values with our core, viz. our relationship with God, or with our culture? This is tricky because we cannot not be immersed in our culture. We naturally use the technology, wear the fashions, participate in the commerce, communicate in the language and live by the laws of America in 2021. At the same time, we must know that our long-term goal, our larger purpose is to become one with God. That means conforming our will to God's will and growing daily in our relationship with God. This means regularly asking if our behavior is leading us toward wholeness, creativity and love – not for our sake but because this is who we are called to be by our Creator and Redeemer, i.e. for the sake of the world.

When our culture tells us that every situation is a money-making opportunity, we should ponder today's gospel. This was the view of the Jews who organized the sacrifices at the Temple. Jesus shows that something besides making money should drive us. This is not to say that churches and synagogues do not need money, but rather that the highest value behind all decisions should be facilitating the easy connection of God and people. Many people are uncomfortable with Jesus' anger in this story, but God clearly considers placing profits first worth getting angry about.

Our passage from Exodus is actually just the beginning of the Covenant Code, four chapters of an ethical code for God's people. God claims the Israelites as such: "I am the Lord, *your* God." God has the right to do so because God "brought you out of the land of Egypt, that slave house." Essential to God is liberation from social oppression¹. Is that essential to us? What's more, "You shall not have other gods besides me." Notice that God acknowledges there are other gods to be had and we all raise up some thing, person or value above God. If this weren't a problem, it wouldn't need a law! Like my students and social media, we know this is the case, but we cannot bring ourselves to set aside our other gods.

The same concern is wrapped up in the command to keep holy the Sabbath day. We are told the scope of resting (a whole day, once a week), who gets to rest (everybody) and why. Sabbath is essential for balance, for love, for the continuity of creativity itself. Yet, we keep adding to our to-do lists and justifying each infringement on our Sabbath. And slowly but steadily, we disintegrate as human beings, disconnect from God and connect to other gods. The call this Third Sunday of Lent to assess our values, ethics and focus is not some out-of-date attempt to catch us up in "Catholic guilt." It is a call to recognize that our core is God. We will always be members of our culture, but even deeper than our culture runs our relationship with God. That relationship should steer our day-to-day choices. Does it?

- ❖ What do you really want in life? How well do your actions reflect that desire?
- ❖ What behavior are you tangled up in? Ask God for help letting it go.

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¹ Thomas Dozeman, "Exodus," *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, 2018, pp. 90-91.