
The Church Has Problems

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Third Sunday of Lent

"I came upon a child of God, he was walking down the road, and I asked him, where was he going, and this he told me."
(from one of the great song-writers).

Two thousand years ago, a child of God was on pilgrimage. He was trying to set his soul free, going up to the great temple of Jerusalem, to offer sacrifice. That trip was the proper pilgrimage for every faithful Jew of the time, for it was only at the temple that true offerings were made.

The common folk, the common pilgrims, would sometimes carry with them the animal they intended to offer. Maybe it was a sheep, or a turtle dove. Often, however, they would just carry the money, so that they could buy the right offering right at the temple itself.

Because there were obstacles in the temple. A proper sacrifice consisted of a proper animal. And the temple authorities included inspectors who would examine your animal. A lamb had to be unblemished. A dove had to be perfect.

"Well, pilgrim, it looks like your lamb, your turtle dove, is not quite right. Uh, you have a problem. There's a slight blemish. But no matter. We have some already inspected and authorized animals right here -whatever you want""cattle, sheep, doves."

"If you want to buy one of them, however, you have to use our currency. You have to use temple money. ,What? ,You don't have the right denomination? The right currency."

"Well, it so happens we have some moneychangers right here. They can help you buy, help you trade; they can exchange your money."

This was what the child of God encountered in the Jerusalem temple two thousand years ago. This was what Jesus saw in the temple two thousand years ago. Jesus could not tolerate it. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" he exclaimed. This was what Jesus overturned and drove out of God's holy place.

There's a new book out about the life of Jesus. There's a new book out every week on that subject! I will not mention the name, because I cannot recommend it yet. One of its claims is that Jesus would not like institutions. He would not like the institutional church.

That's a legitimate claim, as far as it goes. Because the truth is that Jesus did not much like any institution. He certainly was not the political pawn of the state. He rubbed up against the synagogue and the temple. He did not even rest easy about who his mother and father were; the nuclear family was not his favorite institution either.

But it's too easy to throw out institutions these days. It's too easy to say that because Jesus was against institutions, we

should be, too. It's too easy to say I want to be American, but I do not want to sacrifice anything for it; I don't want to participate in political processes.

And it's way, way too easy to make that silly claim that we've all heard: "I'm a spiritual person. I'm just not religious." To me, that's like saying. I am an individualist, and I belong to no community. A spiritual person who is not religious is actually a pretty lonely person. There is no such thing as a spiritual person who does not participate in a religious community. There may be a selfish, self-satisfied, self-righteous, oblivious person who does not belong to a religious community - but that person is not finally spiritual.

I want to make a confession today. I want to acknowledge something that folks have said about churches for a long time: "The church has problems." They are right. And this Cathedral of St. Philip has problems.

And do you know why the church has problems?

Because we bring them here! We're the ones who bring problems here. So, actually, I believe the church is supposed to have problems!

We gather all sorts of sin here. Look out among our community this morning, or this afternoon. We are full of sin. Some of us have stolen in the past week. As much as I want to ignore it, there are some here who have committed adultery. Some of us have lied. Every one of us has coveted something. And I suspect that every one of us has forgotten at some point who the only God is.

We have problems, just like those that the common pilgrim brought to the Jerusalem temple years ago.

And the church (this Cathedral!) is supposed to have problems.

Most of us think that the story of Jesus throwing out the moneychangers from the temple is a biblical justification for anger. "Look!" we say, "Jesus got angry. We have permission to get angry, too."

But look again at the text. Nowhere in this passage does it say that Jesus actually got angry.

There are other passages in the Bible when Jesus was angry; I don't deny that Jesus got angry. I just don't think that Jesus acted here in what we would call wild and uncontrollable anger. Nor should we. Jesus may have been quite calm when we turned over the tables.

Now, Jesus did have a righteous disagreement with the moneychangers and the sellers of religious goods. And this is the primary point of the story.

Jesus objected to the moneychangers and the traders because they did not accept the offerings of the common folk. That child of God had labored hard and traveled far to make a simple offering to God. When he got to the temple, when he got to the institutional church, that institution said, "Your offering is not quite good enough. You need a special coin. You need an unblemished offering."

The sin of institutional religion is not accepting the simple and authentic offering of the people. True religion is supposed to accept us, even if we are imperfect and blemished. In fact, true religion is supposed to accept us especially if we are imperfect and blemished, especially if we have problems.

So, the Church not only has problems. The Church wants those problems!

"Destroy this temple in three days," said Jesus, "and I will raise it back up!" Destroy this sham, Jesus said. Destroy these walls that try to keep out imperfection and sin. Destroy these walls of self-righteousness and pride.

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it back up. He was speaking of the temple of his body, the Body of Christ.

The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ comes to accept our sin and imperfection. When the Christian church is healthy, we are the body of Christ. When the Christian Church is healthy, we take in sin and imperfection and blemish all the time. We have problems, because the Body of Christ is a house of prayer for all people.

One of the most important things we Christians do is accept the offerings of others. It may be posting the crayon picture from our child on the refrigerator door, listening to a poem from our spouse, taking the stranger into our community.

There is no offering that God cannot accept. There is no offering that God cannot use. Sure, God uses the glorious and glittering offerings. But God also uses the imperfect and blemished offerings. God even uses the sin offerings.

Because God would rather he have our sin than have us keep it. Each one of us needs to give God our best, but each one of us needs to give God our worst, too.

The Body of Christ can handle those offerings. We don't need moneychangers and traders. The Body of Christ can handle whatever we give, and whoever we are. Because the Body of Christ is a body of redemption and forgiveness. Destroy the walls that keep out the poor, the walls that keep out the pilgrim and the child of God. Destroy the walls of self-righteousness. Destroy the walls of death and emptiness.

And God will raise up, in us, a new body of life and resurrection power.

AMEN.

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