

Lent 3B
March 7, 2021

Three years ago, several major companies in the USA did the unthinkable. They stood up to the National Rifle Association. Their actions were a response to the courageous high schoolers from Parkland, Florida. After a shooting at their high school, Stoneman Douglas High School, those kids refused to mourn quietly. Instead, they added their voices to those of victims of scores of other communities who have endured mass shootings in recent decades.

Walmart, the most prominent US gun seller, announced that there would be changes. They would no longer sell assault rifles. Same message from Dick's Sporting Goods, and others followed. In January of this year, National Rifle Association, NRA, filed for bankruptcy.

With these actions, these companies and groups of activists made a declaration. There are some things in life that we must value more than profit reports. Some decisions in life must trump the personal desire for a higher moral good.

This is a pretty radical thought in today's context. We live in a world that seems to put a price on everything, in an era that philosophers have referred to as market triumphalism. Market forces and values have come to warp our worldview and life has become an episode of "The Price is Right".

Unfortunately, even religion can be bought and sold. Some places grant piety to whoever can pay most; churches covet those who are well connected and influential in society.

This is what's going on in today's gospel reading. It shows us the collusion of faith and the marketplace. Jesus is heading to the temple in Jerusalem. Like other Jews, Jesus is preparing for the feast of the Passover. Many traveled from far and wide to get to Jerusalem. And when Jesus arrived, he did not like what he saw. People were selling cattle, sheep, and doves on the Temple grounds. There were also money changers—men who had booths open to exchange currency for visitors from far away.

The Temple required burnt offerings in the form of cattle, sheep, and doves. Local vendors knew that people would not travel distances with their animals. So, they turned the Temple grounds into an open-air market. "Get your fatted calf here." "Doves for sale. Buy two and get one free." "We've got sheep—one sheep for one denarius!"

Temple authorities also levied a tax on all worshippers, but they did not accept foreign coins. Like an international terminal at an airport, money changers would set up shop and collect handsome fees for currency exchange.

Jesus probably had seen all this before. But something was different this time. He reacted in a

way that was distinct and defiant. The Bible says that he began immediately driving out the vendors, turning over tables, and pouring out their coins and yelling, “You have turned my father’s house into a marketplace.”

Why this reaction? Maybe Jesus was tired of being an indifferent bystander. Maybe Jesus decided that he could no longer walk by the temple and act as if he didn’t see the abuse. Or maybe he just reached his point where he was “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

New Testament scholars say that what is most informative about this story is not just Jesus’s anger. They emphasize Jesus’s courage. In condemning those who have turned his father’s house into a marketplace, there is a greater issue at stake than vendors. The vendors and money changers are just symptoms of a more serious illness. Jesus is calling out the power structure of the Temple — those who have elevated their thirst for power; those who have elevated their desire for control; and those who have placed their greed over God.

So, at the busiest, most profitable feast of the year, Jesus shuts down their operation. His courage startles people and it calls out the powerful for the injustice. And it exposes the real sin of the temple authorities—their idolatry!

Idolatry—the worship of another god. Idolatry—the object of your heart’s desire. In the words of Martin Luther, it is “that which our hearts cling to and confide in.”

This is why today’s Old Testament reading is the Ten Commandments. Before Moses instructs the people to keep the Sabbath day, honor one’s parents, never murder, steal, lie, or covet that which belongs to another, Moses provides a clear rule—you shall have no other gods! You will not make for yourself an idol, you shall not worship anyone or anything else.

It seems that God realizes that if you and I get the first rule right, it’s a lot easier to adhere to the other ones. Whenever we allow something to become the object of our faith, whenever we allow our hearts to cling and confide in something of our own creation, then it is easy to kill, steal, and destroy in its name. Maybe this is why when we put a price on everything, we cannot discern the true value of anything. Everything becomes monetized, and even our principles and core values are commercialized.

Our faith in God, the good news—what we call the gospel as—can become depreciated. There are just some areas in life that market forces do not belong. And as those teenagers from Parkland helped the companies to see, there are some aspects of life that are too special to devalue with a price or financial influence.

Today’s story reminds me of another story. It is about a Mexican fisherman meeting a business executive. The executive was impressed at how in this small village, a Mexican fisherman caught a boatload of yellowfin tuna.

The executive asked him how long it took him to catch the fish, and why he doesn't stay out longer. The fisherman replied, "I stay out long enough. I get to sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siestas with my wife, stroll into the village each evening to sip wine, and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life."

The executive suggested, "I can help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats. Eventually, you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, and eventually New York City, where you will run your expanding enterprise."

The fisherman asked, "How long will this take?"

The executive said, "10-15 years."

The fisherman said, "Then what will I do?"

The executive said, "That's the best part. Then you will be able to come back to Mexico, sleep late, fish a little, play with your children, take siestas with your wife, sip wine, and play guitar with your amigos."

The moral of the story is that you and I must question what drives us. We must question what animates our behaviors. Sure, markets are necessary. Profits are fine. But some things in life—relationships, love, care, and compassion—are priceless.

Amen.