

Homily 3rd Sunday Lent year B March 3 2024 © Teresa Elder Hanlon

1st Reading 2 Chronicles 36:11-12, 14-21 Psalm 25; 2nd Reading James 4:7-10; Gospel Mark 11:12-22 FNV

What is the intent of a home? What is the intent of a community of people? For that matter, what is the purpose of a body?

When I was with Blackfoot Elders listening to their interpretations and definitions of community, the intent, one man shared was that each person be well, know their purpose and act in healthy relationship with others to survive. That meant looking out for others by sharing one's talents and receiving from others' their service or gifts. The dynamic of respectful interrelatedness makes for a strong community.

I remember a session in spiritual direction training we learned about a leading psychologist, Virginia Satir and her concept for family therapy, that when one member is unhealthy, the whole family must be treated, because no one is unaffected.

In the first reading king Zedekiah's reign is replete with selfishness or evil, and his behaviour influences the whole kingdom – and this, despite the many interventions of a loving God. Finally, the whole country falls to Nebuchadnezzar's dominant power and the people who remain, after countless lives are taken, are sent as captives to Babylon. And then Jeremiah's prophecy is fulfilled: that state will fall to ruin and the land that was their home be neglected for 70 years. Like the roots of a fig tree drying up.

When the intent of a leader, whether government or church is to increase their own power, their wealth, or be consumed by self-interest, the state and the well-being of the people are at stake. This week I read a feature interview with Liz England, who was 18 years with the Canadian military after highschool in Lethbridge. She achieved the rank of major and served in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Afghanistan and Ukraine. She left the military to finish a law degree. Two quotes from Liz England caught my attention: "The military taught me that a good leader doesn't know everything, but is **curious** to learn what might affect their plans." And second: "When you see the effects of a failed or failing state and how people's frustration contributes to its failure, you come to realize how fragile our own democratic institutions really are." To serve one's country well, is to be curious about how others do things that interact with your own plans. A good leader is curious because we, like members of a family, are inter-related. Frustrated members of community contribute to the fragility of democratic institutions. Healthy homes, a

healthy community, a healthy temple or body must be inclusive of others' ways of being. It must receive as well as give.

Brendan Byrne's commentary on today's gospel says that Jesus, as he overturns tables and blocks people from passing through the Gentile quarters of the temple, combines two quotes from scripture, one from Isaiah and the second from Jeremiah. In Isaiah he references God's desire for a prayerful house of many nations. He makes the point that the Source of All Being, Abwoon D'Bwashmaya, Birther, is inclusive! A house that embraces a diversity of gifts including those of Eunuchs and foreigners is God's House. However, a worship space that separates Gentiles and Jews, rich and poor, is not inclusive. Foreigners who passed the temple boundaries separating gentiles and Jews were put to death. Jeremiah's den of thieves *Creator Sets Free* refers to (and I quote from Byrne) is "the utter incompatibility between the presence of God in the Temple and various forms of social injustice and idolatry practiced by the people; [God] threatens to destroy 'this house that is called by my name' but that has become 'a den of bandits'" (Jer 7: 11).

Fig trees are used throughout scripture to connote God's approval and disapproval, or the good health and poor health of a place or people. One commentary says the story of the fig tree is an allegory for Jesus' prophetic nature. His condemnation of the temple commerce, like his condemnation of that tree both lead to ruin. So Jesus' hunger and cursing of the tree is not biographical. It is a literary device inserted by the author of Mark. The two fig tree references sandwich the story of Jesus cursing the temple. The gospel of Mark was written shortly after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Another commentary suggests the reason the fig tree story sandwiches the violence in the temple is because it illustrates the power of judgement. Jesus judges the fig tree. Jesus then judges the leaders of the temple and the imbalance of wealth and gifts in God's house of prayer. They both will come to ruin just like the rule of Zedekiah in our first reading. Warren Carter says we can "understand the withered fig tree as depicting God's judgment on the temple-based Jerusalem leaders and their Roman allies who have rejected Jesus and not discerned God's power and presence in his activity." P. 313 MARK, Warren Carter Wisdom Series Vol. 42. In order to transition from being a "den of thieves or bandits" to a House of Prayer, the foreigners and outsiders must be heard, must be welcomed. Whether Jesus' act of violence is prophetic, judging or corrective as the phrase "cleansing" implies, it reveals Jesus' passion for leaders to

demonstrate values of equality, justice and prophetic obedience. How **do** we serve God and God's desire that we be inclusive of others' cultures, ideas, in relationship with our own?

For us in the journey of Lent I close with words from Jane Vennard, retired pastor and spiritual companion from her book *Fully Awake and Truly Alive*:

The practice of service can become a way of life when you move through your world encountering others who may need your help, as well as those who wish to serve you. How will you respond to the needs you witness as well as the kindness that may be offered?

Service calls us to wake up and pay attention, but in this case, we are called also to see and respond to others. Who needs listening to? Where might kind, true, and necessary words be called for?

How might you become more willing to receive help from others, thus becoming more aware of your natural state of interdependence? End quote
From Jane E. Vennard in *Fully Awake and Truly Alive* (2013) p. 214-215.

In the remaining weeks of Lent, I invite you, when you find yourself opposed to something or someone to stop, be curious and listen. We are fragile as we form a temple, a community and democracy all in this one body. Draw near to the Great Spirit in all its diversity, and the Great Spirit will draw near to you.

QUESTIONS

What struck you in today's readings? When have you welcomed someone else's idea or way of doing things? What's your experience with being welcomed to a foreign place or group?