

"Finding a Place for Prayer"
The Third Sunday in Lent
3 March 2034
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
I Corinthians 1:18-25
St. John 2:13-22

INI

Setting the Standard

The Gospel for this morning sets the stage and standard for our thoughts today. A phrase common amongst us is that this place and places like it shall be "a house of prayer for all people." Jesus, however, finds that it has been made a marketplace. It always worried me as a pastor when various groups in the church would have Advent markets, or pancake suppers, or similar endeavors. When are we advertising our church as a place for prayer. When I was the pastor of the Lutheran Church of Saint Ambrose in Pennsville, New Jersey, I was heartened to see that the church was never locked, always open for meditation and prayer. But no more. It's now locked up tighter than a drum. I am happy that here we open the church on Wednesdays so that whomever can come in and just find a place for prayer. I was heartened last Friday at Saint Mark's in Berkeley, when a young woman came into the chapel where we were preparing for Mass. She wondered if she could just sit in the main church and think. It turns out that she was a Muslim, and health problems, and as a result problems with her family. One of the members sat with her – in silence, and prayed with her. "My house shall be a house of prayer for all people." Perhaps one of our Lenten resolves should be finding a place for prayer, both for ourselves and for our neighbor as well.

What the Covenant Asks of Us

It all begins with the covenant. Jesus summarizes that covenant once in a saying to a young lawyer. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and you shall love your neighbor, as you love yourself." It is interesting that the Ten Commandments are evidence for these provisions of the covenant. The first three of the commandments are devoted to what we owe God, and the latter commandments note what we owe to our neighbor. Thus we owe God, loyalty (You shall have no other gods before me), the holiness of God's name (You shall not take the Lord's name in vain.) and our presence in worship (You shall remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.) Here are those things that we owe to God. And to our neighbor? Honor of father and mother, do not kill, honor your spouse, don't lie, and respect our neighbor's possessions. Jesus' summary of the law takes into account all of these provisions. The covenant between God and us is the beginning of finding a place for prayer, for the sake

of honoring God, and loving our neighbor (and seeing ourselves as a part of God's family. This sets the stage for our prayers.

The Words of My Mouth

One of the phrases in the psalm for this morning is one that is repeated in every student sermon I heard in my training. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer." One hopes that these men and women would have learned other words with which to honor God, and to pray for our neighbor. In Hebrew usage, the ten commandments are known as the Ten Words. Which words describe what we owe to God and neighbor. But there are other words that can be found in our prayer. In the psalm these other words thank God for the beauty of creation, and use the words of an Egyptian poem to honor God's presence with us in creation. There is a delightful story seen on FaceBook. A father hears his daughter repeating the letters of the alphabet, slowly, and religiously. He asks her what she is doing. "I'm praying" she answers. "I don't know exactly what to say, so I'm giving God all the letters and God can figure out what I'm praying about." Saint Paul has a similar reminder to us in Romans: *"In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings."*

The fact that the psalm uses Egyptian or Mesopotamian words to form its prayer of praise and thanksgiving should teach us a lesson that we can find the place for prayer in many cultures and languages.

Cleansing the Temple for Prayer

The story that is related in the Gospel is startling, even troubling. And one wonders how to apply its lesson in our own situation and time. We are so concerned (and here I mean a much wider we than just us, it's a we that includes all of us) we are so concerned about maintenance, and sustainability, that we might have forgotten prayer. Once when visiting Canterbury Cathedral, as we wandered about as tourists taking in all the sights and places, we were interrupted by the sound of a bell and a voice that invited us to prayer. All stopped, all voices were quieted, and the unseen priest offered a prayer. This, I found out, was offered every fifteen minutes. I since have found this offered in other churches and cathedrals. Perhaps we should print out prayers at several locations in our place of worship, perhaps under the windows, or at the steps to the chancel, or at the icons of Jesus and Mary, prayers whose words would be formed by the content of the place. I am reminded of the fine invitation that greets visitors to our church at the front doors in the Narthex.

Finally, the place for prayer can be found in silence – in the wilderness of nothingness, if you will. Meditation and silence can fill our minds and our prayers with great meaning, and words and thoughts that maybe new to us. Jesus cleanses the temple for such nothingness, for silence and meditation. So I will close this meditation with the words that I found so lacking earlier. May they inspire our prayer. *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer."*

SDG