

## ***Making the Most of Organized Religion***

**John 2:13-22**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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Churchill once said in a House of Commons speech, *“Many forms of government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried from time to time.”*

The same thing can be said of even the most progressive organizations on the planet. If it's run by human beings you can be sure it is flawed because human beings are flawed. Nowadays we'd say all organizations are dysfunctional. From the biblical perspective we'd say they are sinful. Not necessarily evil, although some institutions have been decidedly evil, but all are certainly tinged by the presence of sin since human beings are inherently sinful.

Certainly the Church (with a capital “C”) is inherently sinful because all her members and leaders have the tendency to wander off the straight and narrow path into the weeds. The Bible is honest about this. In my Monday Night Bible Study we've been reading the Book of Genesis. The first four Patriarchs of the faith, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were all flawed human beings. They could be dishonest, cowardly, vengeful and downright sinful. Of course none of the heroes of the Bible in either the Old Testament or the New, except Jesus, has a clean slate. St. Augustine, John Chrysostom and all the other early Church Fathers who lived during the first five hundred years of Christianity (except of course St. Patrick of Ireland) did and said some pretty terrible things, even after their conversion to Christ.

Many of the Medieval Popes were charlatans, even John Calvin, Martin Luther and John Knox, the leaders of the Great Reformation five hundred years ago are guilty of petty and even heinous prejudices. And sitting and standing in this sanctuary this very minute you will find an assortment of sinners with blind spots and failings that keep us from being perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.

Unfortunately, but also fortunately, of all the organized institutions in the world today the Church seems to stand out as the easiest moving target for those who disdain organized religion. I say unfortunately because those who gleefully point their accusing fingers at the Church only to muddy the waters fail to realize they are just as flawed and dysfunctional and the organizations they belong to are just as flawed and dysfunctional.

But I also say it's fortunate that the Church is openly criticized because if these charges ring true we can take them to heart and make the necessary corrections.

Even so, any criticism, even constructive criticism is hard to take especially when you hear it from friends and family members who want nothing to do with the Church because they had a bad experience with a pastor of felt unfairly judged and then no longer welcomed by a particular congregation because they didn't have the right skin color, social background or sexual orientation. Why go back and try to fit in in a place like that? I wouldn't, neither would you? It takes a lot of faith, hope and love for someone who felt badly treated to come back and try, try again.

On the other hand many people are turned off by organized religion in general and Christianity in particular because their perceptions have been formed by some high profile celebrities who make their living taking cheap shots at the Church every chance they get. Bill Maher comes to mind. He sets up straw dogs and then with great courage knocks them down.

For example I've heard him say organized religion is to blame for all the violence in the world throughout history. But singling out organized religion specifically is intellectually lazy and conveniently self-serving. The fact of the matter is violence and all the other ills of the world aren't outsourced by religion but through sin.

In other words what came first, people behaving badly or organized religion? Therefore, I submit, dumping all the blame on the Church while ignoring the role of all the other institutions in society, especially atheistic institutions is a nonstarter. The truth is every institution on the planet however progressive or secular is guilty of sinful decisions that lead to bad behavior.

Having said that, we (Christians) cannot use that argument to excuse the failings of the Church. We can't deny and run away from our institutional sin instead it must be faced and corrected, otherwise we'll find ourselves in Christ's crosshairs, just like the temple leaders in today's gospel lesson.

"In the temple Jesus found people selling cattle, sheep and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. Making whips of cords he drove them all out... He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables... 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's House a marketplace!'" (John 2:13)

Matthew, Mark and Luke quote Jesus a little differently. "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a House of Prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of thieves?'" (Mark 11:17)

Notice that verse, "My Father's House shall be a house of prayer for the nations." Jesus called the Temple a "House of Prayer for all the nations" because the Temple wasn't just for the Jews, but the Gentiles as well. This is in keeping with God's promise to Abraham. "You will be a light to all the nations." God also promised Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

So when Jesus stormed in and disturbed the goings on in the Temple Jesus meant to grab everybody's attention in no uncertain terms by making this damning observation, "How can we, Abraham's descendants, claim that we are a blessing to all the families and nations of the earth if we can't even show any real hospitality to the Gentiles when they step over the threshold of the front door?"

How did the Temple Leaders not show hospitality to the Gentiles? The answer may surprise you but also not surprise you.

You would be surprised only when you realize that all the buying, selling and money changing was happening in that section of the Temple called The Court of the Gentiles. You see the Temple was cordoned off in sections. The outer perimeter was the Court of the Gentiles, open to non Jews so they could worship God. Just having this area set aside for the Gentiles shows the Temple Leaders acknowledged their mandate to be a blessing and a light to the Gentiles. But over time, probably because of convenience and most likely because the Gentiles were considered by the Jews as generally loathsome characters in time the Court of Gentiles evolved into a mini mall for religious goods and services. There pilgrims could exchange Roman coins for the Temple coins, for a price, and buy their animals to be sacrificed for their sins by the Temple Priests. What angered Jesus was all this consumerism was taking place in the place set aside for outreach to the Gentiles. How could the Jews reach out to the Gentiles and offer hospitality by expecting them to commune with God with all the animal noises, clinking of coins and the incessant murmur of merchants bargaining with their customers.

So the non Jews introduction to organized religion in Jerusalem was not very welcoming because the message was loud and clear, "Sure, even though you're a pagan you can come into our sacred temple, but you have to stay here in this segregated area. And sorry about all the noise and commotion, but it's the best we can do for you."

This story about Jesus' anger over the arrogance of organized religion should be a wake-up call for all of us who love the Church. All people matter to God. In God's eyes no one is an outsider, which should tell us that we are obligated to be a Christ-like presence welcoming strangers, reflecting God's love and grace not only here on Sunday mornings, but wherever you are. How else can we change the minds of people on the outside, who are suspicious of organized religion, unless we repent as a church and with the help of God's grace resolve to be that "light to all the nations" and a "blessing to all the families of the earth"?

One of the main themes of Jesus' ministry was to make God accessible to all people, and that meant sometimes questioning the place of organized religion in the life of Israel. Was Jesus opposed to organized religion? No, but that doesn't mean Jesus wasn't critical of the problems that come with it.

Remember when Jesus said, "Stop making my Father's house a market place!" and "You have made my Father's house a den or robbers."? Jesus realized the medium had become more important than the message. The institution, the Temple, became more important than

people. The personal power of the temple priests was a higher priority than empowering the people to better know, love and serve God. It got to the point that instead of organized religion serving the people, the people were now expected to serve organized religion. The temple leadership was all about maintaining the status quo and micro managing the people's lives. That's why the scribes and priests were angry when Jesus exposed their temple for what it was, a den of robbers stealing the life out of the people's religion.

I'd like to think that today we are trying hard to make sure our church is not a den of robbers and that we are also trying hard to make sure all people feel welcome in this house of prayer.

As you know, for the past five years many congregations in our presbytery have been going through a process of transformation. We've been on a journey of decentralization and power sharing, trying to get away from the old model of the pastor-centered church, where the pastor wields power through the session, micro managing church programs and ministries. We've moved away from the old committee structure to team building and empowering church members to claim their own power and authority so you can discover and then carry out your own ministry and thereby fulfill your God-given purpose. We don't want to be an oppressive place, but a living, breathing organism, the body of Christ, where people can be in Christian community and experience the full abundant life through the discipleship lifestyle. Yes, we are a branch of organized religion, but we are trying hard to be organized under and around the love of Jesus Christ who commands us to love and serve one another and anyone else God sends our way because all people matter to God.

One of the lessons we should learn from the story of Jesus cleaning out the temple is this: "when we sense Jesus is angry because his Church is becoming self-important instead of self-sacrificing, we should repent and welcome him when he comes to clean house and bring us back to being his light and blessing to all the families of the earth.

John reports the temple officials did not welcome Jesus' prophetic denunciations. They demanded, "What's your justification for you acting this way?" Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." (John 2:19)

Jesus was not threatening to physically destroy the massive temple that took forty-six years to build and then miraculously replace it in three days, but he was saying that the days of the Temple were numbered, his crucifixion and resurrection would make the temple irrelevant. You see, Jesus came to earth to transform our self-centered mode of worship; there would be no more reason to mass sacrifice lambs on the temple alters, because Jesus himself is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Does this mean organized religion is obsolete, that our unchurched friends are right and we are wrong? Not at all, as long as we remember Christ calls us to be his Church of servant saints, disciples who live to follow the way of Jesus by proclaiming the Good News and being a Christ-like presence in our broken world.

Madeleine L'Engle, a Christian author, once talked about her Episcopal church in New York City. She sensed God calling her to membership when on her first visit a man stood up and requested prayer because "I was an abused child and I am terrified of becoming an abusive father. I need help and prayer."

L'Engle knew right then and there this was her new church home, "Because people are willing to be vulnerable... Sometimes it gets messy but that's O.K. People are not afraid, we're able to admit we're all broken, we've all made terrible mistakes, we're all in need... It's a church in which a mother whose 27 year old son has died is free to say, 'People think I'm terrible because I can't pray,' and we can reassure her 'You don't have to pray now. We're praying for you.' That's what the body of Christ is all about."

As this holy season of Lent continues, and you pray for your sins and mediate on God's Word, also pray for your church, that we will continue to work hard to be organized around the love of Christ so we can truly be his presence in the world he loves so deeply.