

It is again that time of year when our conversations are focusing on the **Big Ten!** I know many of you have a certain, intent interest in at least one group represented in the Big Ten. So, today, I would like to begin by talking about the **Big Ten**. However, the **Big Ten** I am going to refer to were given to Israel by Moses at Mt. Sinai, just after the Israelites had left Egyptian slavery. They are of course the Ten Commandments which are rules that were established to **maintain** the Israelites' freedom **from** Egypt.

Many people probably see **these** Big Ten as a list of do's and don'ts. However, when we look at today's reading from Exodus, it is very important to note the Ten Commandments **begin, not** with a word about rules and do's or don'ts, but with a word about a **very gracious God**. They begin with a word about **God's** identification as the One who has graciously **freed** Israel from bondage in Egypt. Note, the first line of our reading from Exodus, "**I am** the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." From the very beginning, **this** listing of the **Big Ten** begins by naming our gracious, emancipatory, liberating God:

I am the Lord your God.

I am the Lord of the Exodus.

I am the God who liberated you and gave you freedom.

I am the Lord of new promises.

Demonstrating enormous contrast to the **bondage** and **injustice** of life under Pharaoh, **these** Big Ten that God gives to the people are **gift**. These Big Ten are centered in God's **liberating love**! They are strategies for living in a society ordered around **freedom** and **justice** and living in **right relationship to God and to each other**. You see, every society needs rules to function and operate, and these Big Ten rules are given to help the people live in **freedom** once they have gotten **away** from Pharaoh. They are **gift** to those God has **freed** from **slavery**. And, these Big Ten are a gift to each one of **us** as God continually liberates **us** from all that holds **us** in bondage, and as we live in loving relationship to God and to our neighbor. Freed from the powers that oppressed, these Big Ten remind the Israelites and each one of us that we are to let nothing other than love and worship of **God alone** claim first place in our lives.

In today's gospel reading, we find Jesus throwing the merchants out of the temple. **Jesus** is defending the worship of **God alone** and rejecting the ways commerce and profit-making can become our gods. The Jewish temple system, out of necessity, had become a marketplace. The truth is the temple **needed** a marketplace for people to sacrifice according to Jewish law. People needed to buy animals for their sacrifices, and they needed animals without blemish. They also needed to be able to change

money because it was not lawful to buy these animals with Imperial Roman coins imprinted with the engraving of Caesar. They needed local currency so they could purchase the animals. The temple marketplace really was essential.

In today's gospel reading, the writer of John's gospel tells us about Jesus disrupting protocol and procedures and "cleansing the temple," a story found in all four gospels. However, unlike the other gospel writers who place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry, John places this disruptive scene at the very **beginning** of Jesus' ministry. Jesus enters the temple and does not like what he sees. He begins wielding a whip and drives the animals out of the building. He topples the tables of the money changers, disrupts daily temple business, and demands an end to all the buying and selling. In John's story, Jesus tells the dove sellers (they are the ones who have animals the poor people could use in their sacrifices), "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Eugene Peterson in his *Message Bible* translates "marketplace" as "shopping mall." I think the words "shopping mall" help us better understand the system that had **developed** within the temple. Quite honestly, the problem in John's gospel seems to be **the whole temple system**. As this story is presented in John's gospel, Jesus is challenging

the **whole** temple sacrificial system. **Jesus** ushers in a form of **liberation** and emancipation as his ministry brings forth in a whole **new** understanding of God and the way God is to be worshiped. This becomes very clear to us when Jesus is asked, “What sign can you give us for doing this?” and he responds saying, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Of course, those who are listening think he is talking about the temple that has been under construction for forty-six years. But John tells us that Jesus is talking about his own body. **He** will die. **He** will be raised up. **He** is the **new** temple of God. **He** is replacing this the temple system. People will now come to know God through **him**.

Yes, Jesus is upsetting the whole temple system, something that meant everything to the Jewish people. Their whole lives revolved **around** and were wrapped up **in** this system. Jesus unsettles the temple system and I think Jesus unsettles the systems in which we become totally invested, and God continually works to free **us from those** systems.

Theologian, Daniel Clendenin, says that he reads this story as a “stark warning against any and every false sense of security.” He goes on to say, “misplaced allegiances, religious presumption, spiritual complacency, nationalist zeal, political idolatry, and economic greed in the name of God are only some of the tables that Jesus would overturn in his own day **and**

in ours.” You see, Jesus is overturning the loyalties we put in the wrong places, the beliefs we have that **our** religious assumptions somehow describe life finally and totally. He is overturning our satisfaction with where we are spiritually. He is overturning our sense that our nation is the “only” nation and the “right” nation, as in “America first.” He is overturning our political ideas that sometimes become too important for us. He is overturning the tables of **greed** that take advantage of too many people. He is overturning every part of **every** system that somehow suggests God is not God, that it is **not** God in whom we trust. Remember the top of the list of the **Big Ten - you shall have no other gods before me!**

We as human beings place our ultimate trust in all kinds of things. We trust the ideas we have, the programs we create, the families we raise, the institutions we help to shape, the political parties we favor, the nation we claim as ours, the churches to which we belong. And then look what happens: the stock market falls, banks mislead, pandemics arise, church and family disappoint, ideas and various ideologies serve only to separate people. And we are shocked. I want to suggest that Jesus, this “table turning prophet,” wants to shock **us** before the collapse sets in. He is unsettling the temple system before the whole temple system falls apart; before the temple itself is destroyed. Jesus has a zeal and passion for the

house of God that consumes him because he has a zeal and passion for **God**, the One who truly challenges **all** our systems. Jesus has a zeal for the One who challenged Pharaoh and all the Pharaoh's **we** are in bondage to, so that **we** can be freed **from** them. Ultimately, it is **God alone** who is above all these things, **God alone** who is worthy of our trust. Yet, guess what, the religious and political leaders of Jesus' day never quite got this and never understood it. They put Jesus to death because of the way he **challenged** their systems. But the writer of John's gospel wants us to know that Jesus' death is **not** a sign that they win. It is a sign that God's **love** and **grace** is bigger than **any** of our systems, and it is love that wins.

Jesus begins ministry as a "table turning prophet" and takes on the **whole** temple system to inaugurate a new era in which God's **love** and **grace** is available to everyone. And, the truth is, sometimes it takes the tables to be overturned for **us** to understand such unfathomable grace. Jesus' violent outburst announces a new beginning in which the grace of God is accessible to **all**, a grace that accepts each one of us, blemishes, wounds, scars, deep brokenness, and all. So, I say, "Jesus, come and overturn our tables. Make us uncomfortable because the place you take us to is the deeper place. The place you take us to shows us a God of rich immeasurable grace and love. After all, **you are** the new temple."