

Sermon 2021 Lent 3

Text: John 2:13-22

Theme: The Vast Sea of Mediocrity

When I was in High School, I had a teacher who would lecture us almost daily on the dangers of swimming in vast sea of mediocrity. I spent the first part of my Freshman year looking for this strange sea on the map. Dead Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Baltic Sea but no Sea of Mediocrity. Finally, someone clued me in on the word mediocre. The literal meaning of the word "mediocre" is "half way up the mountain." To swim in the vast sea of mediocrity is to spend one's life only going half way up the mountain and then turning around. It is to allow half way to be good enough. It is never to have reached the top and to never have known excellence.

During my Sophomore year of High School, I considered true excellence knowing who threw the best parties and convincing Miss Godfrey that there really was a hole in the back of my locker through which my Trigonometry homework fell. Later in High School and on into college, however, I finally began to see the Vast Sea of Mediocrity all around me, and I began to fear that I too was swimming in it.

During this time, not only was my knowledge of the world growing, but my knowledge of and faith in God were growing as well. I think it was my pastor more than any teacher in school who taught me about what it is to be mediocre and what it is to be excellent. God demands

excellence. From the very beginning, he tells us straight up that he is a jealous God and will not settle for anything less than perfection. He created us to be holy and blameless saints. He created us gifted and in his likeness. He created us for excellence. God knows that half way is as good as nothing at all. Hence, in our relationship with God, it is all or nothing. No one is a little bit saved or almost saved. And once saved, we cannot be holy on a part time basis. Your faith is always either growing or dying.

So that there would be no question with regard to his expectations, God clearly spells them out in the Ten Commandments. If only the IRS were as simple as the Lord. Here in the Old Testament reading for this morning we have a few simple paragraphs. If followed, they will produce excellence. That is why the Lord gave them to us. His people were in the wilderness, out from under foreign rule for the first time in over 400 years. Here was their chance to start fresh and pursue excellence. Here was their time to learn what a life of excellence was like, a society in which everyone feared, loved and trusted God, a society in which everyone loved his neighbor as himself.

Of course, by the time Jesus came, things had not gone particularly well. He entered the place in which God was worshipped, a place that ideally would be more excellent than any other place on earth. What he

found was something that approached Costco on a Saturday morning. The people of God were swimming in the vast sea of mediocrity. Worship was secondary to commerce and God was an afterthought at best.

What was it that made Jesus so angry? Commerce in the temple courts was a common practice and had been for a long time. The temple had to be place of commerce. One had to travel to the temple to sacrifice the kind of animal that one was required to sacrifice under the ceremonial law. Many Jews lived a great distance from the temple, so it was impractical to bring the animals along on the journey. Thus, one needed to buy them in Jerusalem. Then one had the problem of inequality of money. Certain Roman coins were favored at the temple because of their purity of gold. So, money had to be exchanged before leaving an offering or even buying a sacrifice. All of that was only to serve worship. However, worship had become secondary to business.

Imagine for a moment that when you came to Trinity this morning, we had a series of tables set up in the narthex. Each person who came for worship had to be processed. At the first table you had to make a list of the sins for which you needed forgiveness and then a member of Lay Ministry would check that over with you. At the next table, a member of the property maintenance committee would go over a list of duties that you could perform in order to show your sorrow for your sin: you know,

waxing the floors, cleaning toilets, weeding the prayer garden. At table three you would turn in your family's pay stubs for the previous month and a member of the stewardship committee would add them up and multiply by 10% to determine what offering you owed God. At table four, you could negotiate with the head usher to purchase a better seat, get special prayers for your family and friends, and your choice of communion wine. At table five, you could negotiate the tuition for your children in Sunday School, Preschool and youth group. Finally, you would go to the cash register at the door with your totaled invoice, having determined your offering plus special addons, and someone would take your cash, check or credit card. Then, and only then, you could proceed into worship. How would you feel about such a system? That would approximate what Jesus felt when he saw the worship of his Father being reduced to purchasing animals and exchanging currency.

Jesus too, like his Father, expects excellence. How do we reach excellence? Certainly not by adopting models we find in the world. I don't know about you, but as I peruse parenting books, self-help books, church growth books and YouTube infomercials, I see a great many very worldly models for excellence. Excellence in the world means having a fat checkbook and lots of power. But as far as God is concerned, those who have only acquired power and money float face down in the sea of

mediocrity. Excellence for God revolves around love; love for the Lord and love for one another. What else matters?

If I am excellent at writing, for instance, but a failure at loving, what good am I? Everything I write will be gone and forgotten in a few years. But the God I have loved will be with me forever, and the brothers and sisters in Christ who I have loved will be with me forever. The appropriate model for true excellence is in the Bible, beginning with the 10 Commandments, at the heart of which is love for God and love for each other.

All of us are teachers to someone, and all of us struggle to stay out of the vast sea of mediocrity. We do so by loving the Lord with all our heart, mind and soul and to loving others as ourselves. We have been given the incredible responsibility and the vast privilege to teach God's people to fear, love and trust in him. This is burdensome because people will learn by our example. What does it say if you elevate anything over worship? What about your use of language? What about your management of all the gifts God has given to you? What about your faithfulness in returning a portion of those gifts to God? And if God calls us to account for our management of money, which he promises to do, how much more will he call us to account for our management of the human lives he has entrusted to our care and nurture?

We feel the full weight of the Law, because we know that every time someone has seen us violate the Law of God, we have taught him something. Every time we have screamed or hit in anger. Every time we have shown disrespect to any authority, particularly our elected leaders. Every time we have gossiped. Every time we have failed to love God or others. We have taught them every time. Every single time.

Who will rescue us from this burden? Jesus will, because he destroyed that old temple and built a new one. The old temple was made of mortar and stone, but the new temple is made of us. We are the body of Christ and we are therefore powerful. Yes, we are called to an awesome task, but we are just the people to do it because we have been rescued from the vast sea of mediocrity. Jesus went to the top of the mountain for us and now he waits for us and empowers us as we climb behind him.

We are not left to this task by ourselves. We are given one another for encouragement. We are filled with the Holy Spirit every Sunday as the body and blood of Christ enter us, and while we are not yet excellent, we are given a taste of excellence and we know the direction to swim. We are the body of Christ, set to task and swimming strongly away from the sea of mediocrity and into God's Excellent Paradise.