

**3 Lent B March 4, 2018**  
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**Good Places**  
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There is no shortage of opinions about what is wrong with our world or our country these days. From talk shows, opinion articles, and podcasts it seems everyone enjoys chiming in on the subject. Often the complainer is simply complaining, but occasionally a person gives helpful insight on how our collective way of life has been changing, the positive and negative consequences of those changes and then offers possible ways forward that could liberate us from what is wrong so that we might live better.

One such voice appeared on the scene 30 years ago in 1989 when Ray Oldenburg, professor of Sociology at the University of West Florida first published his book titled *The Great Good Place*. Prof. Oldenburg's thorough work claims that what is wrong with America is the development of suburbia combined with what he called "hostile habitats" that have led to the extinction of community gathering places, causing many more Americans to experience feelings of isolationism and boredom. Oldenburg can trace this trend to post WWII housing developments, which led to people moving to less diverse areas where there was less interaction with neighbors.

Oldenburg also notes the disappearance of neighborhood corner stores, which were overtaken by big chain stores located in strip areas on the edge of towns; as well as the little cafes and coffee shops that gave way to other chains that offer the convenience of drive through service but very little space inside to sit and rest or have a conversation with a friend or hang out and meet someone who just moved into town. But you can get a cup of coffee quickly and just as quickly get back on your way to wherever you are going. He notes that once drug stores were places youth hung out at lunch counters or soda fountains, but these amenities have long since been removed because the prevailing belief changed to the purpose of drug stores being places to help people find what products they need for better health and then go quickly on their way to experience that better health someplace else.

Oldenburg calls these modern spaces "hostile habitats" because they are designed for consumers to get in and get out as quickly and efficiently as possible. There are no chairs for comfort and even if you are known to the employee working there, managers will chastise those workers for talking too long with customers.

If left unchanged, Oldenburg warned the situation will produce less informed, less kind, less empathetic, and more depressed, more frustrated, more bored individuals and eventually lead to a more divided and less understanding society. His solution to this problem is to create what he calls the "Third Place." The Third Place

can be any place: a barber shop, library, café, where a diverse group of people are known, recognized, and experience a sense of belonging. It's where you run into someone you know and can comfortably sit and chat for a few moments or a few hours and no one will ask you to leave or spend more money. In fact, someone else might stop by and join you. It is where people with differing viewpoints can freely share their views and be kept in check with kindness and understanding. Oldenburg maintains this is not nostalgia for the good ol' days, this is a necessary element that could liberate society from our growing fear and distrust of each other.

While his book has been eagerly embraced by many, others find it offensive and dated. But what I see in it is someone who is turning the tables on systems designed to make a profit by speaking out about the cost that system takes on society.

Which makes that book a little bit like what Jesus may have been up to in our Gospel reading today when Jesus chased out livestock and turned over the tables of money changers in the grand temple in Jerusalem.

This event, often called the "cleansing of the temple" by Biblical scholars, appears in all 4 canonical Gospels, which means, those same scholars tell us, it is highly likely to be historically accurate. For some people this story is exciting and one of their favorites, others are offended by Jesus' display of what some call anger and others call violence.

No doubt it is a powerful event and was interpreted as such in the time it happened just as it is today. A lot is going on in these few lines from John's Gospel, and it is easy to get caught up in the shouts of Jesus or the cracking of that whip of chords, or the stampeding and moaning animals, or the clanging of all those coins on the elaborate temple floors that we miss the many nuances the author of John has packed into this event. Remember today we are hearing from John's Gospel and John's Gospel always has more to the story than first meets the eye.

Starting with the timing of this event; when it was almost the Passover. Remember the Passover was about liberation, when God liberated the Israelites from a life of oppression under Egypt, so they would be free to live as the People of God. The book Exodus tells not just about that exciting exit from Egypt, it also tells about how God provided for God's People whatever they needed to live a life of freedom while they were learning to be free. When the People were hungry, through Moses, God gave them food. When they were thirsty, God, through Moses again, showed them where to find water. And when they didn't know how to behave as God's People, God gave them what we call the 10 Commandments. There are plenty of folks who like to complain about the 10 Commandments, saying they are just another form of oppression and a long list of "don'ts". But that was not really God's intention. The 10 Commandments were God's way of freeing God's people from living as oppressed

people to living as free people: people free to form their own relationships, free to own property, free to make choices they hadn't been allowed to make before. Such freedom can be overwhelming, and when a person doesn't understand what they are free to be, what they are free to live into, all too often, they fall back into what they knew instead of living into the new possibilities. When a person doesn't know God, it can be hard if not impossible to recognize which way of living is closer to God, and the 10 Commandments were intended to help people learn who God is and grow closer to God and each other.

That is why we still recite the 10 Commandments at the start of our church service during Lent. Not to make us feel guilty for what we have failed to do, but to remind us God intends to liberate us from all that can distract us from being close to God and each other, and to help us recognize what is of God.

That the author of John has Jesus cleanse the temple near the Passover might suggest Jesus was speaking against some form of oppression that was getting in the way of God's People and their relationship with God. While the other Gospels say the money changers were robbing people, John's Gospel makes no such accusation. In John's Gospel it is not necessarily clear what made Jesus do what he did. Because the people selling animals were doing something they were supposed to do, it was all laid out in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. The animal sellers were essential, because offering animal sacrifice was part of how people worshiped God at the temple. The money changers too, were offering an important service, as the temple would not accept any government minted money, and they exchanged it for the accepted currency, so the people could purchase the animal they could afford so they could worship God. Yet these were the folks Jesus chose to go after; to chase out their animals and overturn those exchange tables.

Because maybe Jesus was saying something about the system of animal sacrifice, a system that appears in Leviticus but not in the 10 Commandments. And maybe Jesus was showing something about God. Perhaps God does not desire the life of an animal as a form of worship and insisting on maintaining a system that perpetuates such sacrifices is what angers God. Maybe that system did nothing for creating a loving relationship between God and God's people, and God wanted that system to end. God wanted God's people liberated from such a system, so they could be free to know God for who God really is, not the bloodthirsty entity they thought God to be.

Another part of John's Gospel to take into consideration today is that this Gospel was written after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple in Jerusalem had been a grand and glorious thing, the building of which was started by Herod the Great, the temple did not lack for elaborate ornamentation. However, the maker left its mark

on the temple, as historians and archaeologists tell us above the main gate was a golden eagle, the symbol of Roman authority, not God. At the time John's Gospel was written both Jews and followers of Jesus were in the process of reinterpreting the significance of the temple. Before its destruction, the temple had been the center of Jewish life: religious, political and societal. It was where the Jewish nation both celebrated and mourned. It was similar to a great good place, like Ray Oldenburg wrote about, and it was believed to be where God resided with God's people.

After the temple's destruction, the Presence of God in the world was seen differently. For many Jews, God was present in the synagogue and study of Torah. For followers of Jesus, God is Present in what we still call the Body of Christ; both the sacrament we are invited to share at Holy Communion and in the community of people following Jesus who we believe was raised after his death, which we also heard in today's Gospel. Already the belief was emerging that God is not present in only one location, but wherever those who love God gather and create space to get to know God, and each other. Which means God is Present in Christ right here and now. In Holy Communion. In our prayers. In our conversations at coffee hour. In our Lenten programs. In our open chapel. In our ministries. Wherever and however we make the love of God in Christ known.

However, there can be times when we can get just as used to systems that no longer serve that purpose as our predecessors did. We, too, can forget God is bigger and more wonderful than the way we always do things. Jesus driving out animals and overturning those tables full of money can inspire us to examine the systems we are engaged in and reflect how they are or are not helpful in liberating us to live into the life God wants for us and calls us to as individuals and as a parish to. Some have said Lent is a time of cleaning out our hearts and our lives; Jesus cleaning of the temple could remind us that such a cleaning out in our parishes and ministries might also be a good thing. If such a thought makes our hearts tremble with fear, we might find courage in today's Gospel that Jesus was a champion of changes that clean away that which no longer serves to create loving relationships between God and God's people, so while it might feel uncomfortable, we will be okay. And when we are free to love God and each other, instead of being oppressed by a system, we might just discover ways to create the sense of love and belonging found in all great good places, including this place and all places we find ourselves in.