

March 8, 2015  
St. Anne's

### **What in the world?**

*What in the world has gotten into you?* Does anyone remember a time in your life when—if truth be told—you weren't really acting like yourself, and someone—a parent or grandparent or someone else who knew you well asked this question? It is usually asked with some puzzlement, and an understanding that something must be going on underneath the surface to have set you off to behaving so out of character. Of course, someone might ask you this if you are doing something Eddie Haskel-like or uncharacteristically good.

*What in the world has gotten into you?* It is much more likely to come up when you have been behaving *badly*, with that tone that says *you really know better, right?*

This is the first question I had in mind to ask Jesus after reading all three gospels we have heard today—2 from the Gospel of Mark in our journey through the Bible, and the third being the appointed Gospel of the day from John. Jesus, whom we know and love, and to whom we pray and from whom we live and move and

have our being, is on a *tear* this Sunday, and it is just a little unsettling.

First we have the story of Jesus walking into the synagogue to into a hostile crowd who was already waiting for him to do something wrong, and *hoping* he would, so that they could publicly accuse him and have him arrested. The Pharisees took their job of keepers of the Law very seriously, and did not appreciate how Jesus had been challenging their long-held authority in the way he was teaching their people. They did not take kindly to Jesus discounting the letter of the Law for the spirit of the Law, and they were ready to catch Jesus in an infraction in front of God and everybody so that they could discredit him and maintain their status and their grip on their congregation and their community. The issue to the Pharisees was the keeping of the Sabbath; to Jesus the issue was a man in need of healing. The restoration of the withered hand in front of their eyes was an in-your-face challenge to a restrictive interpretation of Sabbath law; the act argued for one which made room for life-giving compassion. Yet even the healing was not enough to persuade their hard hearts. The gospel tells us

Jesus was grieved; I imagine what they could see was that he was *peeved*, because their zeal over their rules blinded them to the suffering of their brother.

As the multitudes followed Jesus everywhere, crushing him to the point of needing to go out into the sea in a boat, the Jewish authorities were cultivating allies to get rid of him. The Herodians were the ruling class descendents of Herod, the one whose desire to kill Jesus as an infant was thwarted first by the Wise Men who went home by another way, and then by the family's escape to Egypt after Joseph had been warned in a dream. The Herodians maintained their power in Judea by colluding with Rome, and assisting the Romans in squeezing the life blood out of their own people through taxes and tributes while maintaining their own status and wealth. Jesus, who took up for the poor and could spot a hypocrite at 100 yards, was every bit the enemy Herod had thought he might be, but for very different reasons. Herod had feared a rival King who would unseat him and his dynasty with an army. Instead, his offspring were plotting with the Pharisees to

eliminate a man who healed and blessed and stirred up the unclean spirits.

Our second gospel story moves the action across the Sea of Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes. Here Jesus goes right up to a man who howls and breaks chains with his bear hands and beats himself with stones—a man who recognizes Jesus and calls him the Son of the Most High God. This demoniac, as he was called, was not in his right mind; the people *literally* thought *something had gotten into him*—unclean spirits who spoke through him and challenged Jesus. For some reason Jesus did as these crazy sounding spirits asked and sent them off into a herd of pigs who went plunging over a cliff into the sea and drowned. What was he thinking? He walked right up to a crazy man, calmed him and “put him in his right mind.” At the same time he made the *former* owners of the pigs quite agitated, as they ran off and told everyone they could find what had happened. The story could not have been more astonishing if the pigs had flown off that cliff with newly sprouted wings. Healing is one thing, but this? Jesus must have looked like those demons had rubbed off on him, because the people in the neighborhood *begged him to leave!* (Maybe the

shepherds thought the sheep would be next!) They might have been amazed at Jesus but they were also afraid of him, and *who wouldn't* be afraid of someone who could command the demons?

Our third Gospel reading is from John. The story about Jesus *losing it* at the Temple is found in all four gospels, a fact which gives it credibility and makes it important. Matthew, Mark and Luke place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry in the world, just before he is arrested, allowing our imagination to see his behavior as the final provocation. John places it at the *beginning* of his journey, and uses it as John uses many stories, to highlight Jesus as the Son of God come to save the world. The basic context of the story is the celebration of the Passover, which brought many Jews home to the Temple from all over, and which had evolved to include ritual sacrifices to God requiring the purchase of the right kind of animals just inside the gates. The money changers were functioning at least in their own minds in holy work, making sure everyone had what they needed to get the job done and keep all participants on God's good list for another year. I see them as sort of an ancient altar guild—just wanting to help everyone to do everything just right—though it is more likely they were collecting

silver than polishing it. Imagine coming to a church full of sheep and cattle and birds, all lowing and cooing generally causing their own anxious, smelly mess. Then there was the lending and the borrowing, the exchanging of currencies, and the bargaining for price, much like a marketplace for access to God's grace. And then here comes Jesus, like he owns the place, whipping the animals to drive them out, upending the tables and the commerce, and yelling at the brokers of sacrifice that their "zeal for their house" was missing the point and sending Jesus right over the edge. He was passionate and probably confusing and probably looked a little crazy. But what *had* gotten into Jesus that day?

The message here, in this violent, out-of-character clean-out that Jesus performed, and his declaration that he *himself* was the Temple, is a message of challenge—to think about how and where we look for God. Remember for a long time God was thought to live in the Ark of the Covenant, a box which sat isolated in the innermost room of the Temple, the holiest of places allowing only the holiest of men to approach it. The closest people were allowed to get to it was in the ritual of buying an animal and then turning it

over to the professionals to sacrifice it for them. Jesus was trying to change that paradigm. By tearing up the infrastructure for this old and ineffective way of reaching God, Jesus was pointing away from the Temple and to himself, giving the people a new focus for worship that they did not yet understand. He was showing that they could not *buy* God's grace and forgiveness, because through Jesus it would be given to them as free gift. And when the temple of his body was destroyed in its crucifixion, it would be raised on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. Jesus was telling the people to turn around and re-focus their attention *away* from the old Temple and *towards* himself—away from a place of ritual sacrifice and toward a place of prayer and healing for those with withered hands, and for those who howled and bruised themselves with stones, and for all those who were poor and oppressed and broken and alone.

*What in the world had gotten into Jesus?* Nothing short of show-stopping radical love. His message was that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” and that took some drama to be believed. And that is why we re-create that drama

every time we break the bread together in the Eucharist, and why we welcome the seeker to the table with us, and why we then go out and take this Good News of radical love outside the walls and into the world. May our zeal for our God be so fired up that people start asking, “what in the world has gotten into them?” And if a few tables get turned over in the process, thanks be to God. AMEN