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March 3, 2018

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Third Sunday of Lent

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Exodus 20:1-17

Psalms 19

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

John 2:13-25

In the lore of the Sisters of St. Joseph, there is a story of how Mother Cecelia Bowen of Springfield, Massachusetts, taught her sisters what integrity demanded of anyone who wished to dress as a woman religious. In the 1880s, on the very day that a group of novices were given the habit, she marched all of them out to spend their first afternoon as nuns with the people in the almshouse. She even had one of them empty her trunk so it could carry what the group was bringing to the people and the things necessary to celebrate the Eucharist with the poor.

Those young women, newly dressed as nuns, would never forget that their habit was a sign of their commitment to Christ's poor.

Mother Cecelia would have well understood why Jesus did what he did in the Temple. On the day Jesus made his first public appearance in Jerusalem, he took on the Temple establishment for perverting the core symbol of God's presence among the people by making what was intended to be a place of communion into a business venture.

But Jesus' "cleansing of the Temple" was more than just a violent reaction against attempts to sell grace. It was actually his first proclamation about who he was and what his mission would entail.

John loves to hide hints to deeper meaning in his Gospel, thus enticing his readers to go back and find more each time they encounter it. In this story, Jesus arrives at the Temple area and calls it his Father's house; with that he is claiming to be God's Son as described in Psalm 2. As he lashes out against the Temple merchants and bankers, the disciples perceive that Jesus is like Jeremiah whose passion for God's work will bring him persecution.

Finally, Jesus engages in his first cryptic conversation with the leaders of his people. Upset that he has disrupted the business of religion, they demand that he authenticate himself by some sign that proves he is of God.

Taking their words far deeper than they intended, he said, "Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up."



(Mark Bartholomew)

They completely missed his implication. As if they didn't understand the difference between the holy of holies and the entire Temple complex, they responded that the work of construction had gone on for more than two generations, "and you will raise it up in three days?"

They were concentrating on protecting a building and its enterprise; Jesus was passionate about God's presence in their midst. As they accused him of disrespecting the Temple, he was reacting to their perversion of what the Temple was and what it symbolized. He insisted that in spite of their profanation, nothing could overcome God's will to dwell amid humankind.

Beginning with the reading from Exodus presenting the commandments that set the boundaries on how the people of God live in communion with God and one another, today's Scriptures are a call to authenticity in our life and worship. Paul tells us not to look for great signs or sophisticated theories but to concentrate on God's unexpected and countercultural message of love via the cross. Crowning it all, John's Gospel depicts Jesus making a living theater of God's rejection of religious practice that is anything less than an expression of love.

Jesus did what he did in the Temple because he believed he was the Son of a loving God who wanted nothing more nor less than the whole heart of the chosen people.

When he walked into that Temple, his faithfulness demanded that he act out God's judgment on what was happening there — no matter the cost to himself.

The disciples spoke of his zeal, which is a word that could also describe passionate integrity. As we contemplate this Gospel and the readings that fill out its message, we are asked where we stand in the scene John presents.

Do we take the side of those who defend business as usual, ignoring how often the busyness of our pursuits and our concerns for externals blind or protect us from a vibrant and even surprising relationship with God?

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Do we stand on the sidelines with the disciples who see prophetic actions and remain as cheering spectators who applaud and say, "Wow! That looks like somebody who really believes in God!"

Or are we willing to follow God's Son and try to live with the sort of integrity that will keep us on the margins of respectable society and close to the heart of God?

Mother Cecelia didn't chase anyone out of a temple, but she did lead her sisters away from status symbols into the company of the poor. What actions of integrity would she and Jesus expect of us who sign ourselves daily with the cross of Christ?

[Mary M. McGlone is a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet who is writing the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org. Sign up to receive [email newsletters](#) every time Spiritual Reflections is posted.

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 23-March 8, 2018** print issue.