

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, March 15, 2009  
Rev. William Love  
*In Three Days*

Exodus 20:1-17  
1 Corinthians 1:22-25  
John 2:13-22

In a book which chronicles the history of clowns and the various categories of clowns, John Towsen tells a rather remarkable story about one particular mountebank.

*A mountebank was usually an unlicensed "doctor" who pulled teeth and peddled homemade pills and potions. Many of his medicines were worthless, if not actually harmful, while others were standard folk remedies. Mountebanks were a frequent sight in the Middle Ages, but their fascinating story spans...from antiquity to the medicine show of the nineteenth century, and even to present-day commercial television.*

*The mountebank derived his name from the practice of climbing onto a bench (mount-a-bank) in order to gather and address a crowd; if he could afford to, however, he would erect a temporary platform stage, complete with backdrop. The mountebank's zany usually was known by some popular equivalent for clown, such as Merry Andrew or Harlequin. Often his nickname was a favorite food of the land: Jack Pudding in England, Jean Potage [soup] in France, Pickelherring in Holland, and Hanswurst in Germany.*

*The mountebank was regarded by the more wary members of society as a dangerous charlatan who would be far from town before it was discovered that his guaranteed remedies were not as effective as promised. ... But if the mountebank was a fraud, he was also something of a clown, and his pranks and jests were often well worth the price of admission. Indeed, many performers had experience both in the role of mountebank and in that of zany.*

*He could be a rogue both on stage and off. One of the most incredible mountebank stories was told of the bold Italian trickster, Mantacinni. Young, eloquent, and fashionably dressed, he traveled about in a splendid chariot drawn by two fine horses. Arriving in Lyon, France, he shocked the townspeople by promising that in fifteen days he would bring to life all those who had been buried in the public graveyard during the preceding ten years. His announcement caused so much excitement that Mantacinni was mobbed wherever he went. His calm reaction was to ask the local authorities to put him under guard as a guarantee that he would remain in Lyon until he had fulfilled his promise.*

*As anticipated, this inspired the public's confidence, and that week Mantacinni reaped a small fortune selling his elixirs. But while the mountebank counted his money, his assistant grew more apprehensive as to the outcome of this impossible prank. "Be quiet and wait," Mantacinni instructed him. "You know nothing of [human nature]."*

*The very next day, the mountebank received a letter from a local resident offering him a thousand francs **not** to revive the man's hot-tempered wife. Next there came a similar proposal from two brothers not particularly anxious to see their miserly father return, followed by a sobbing young widow about to remarry who expressed the same sentiments about her late husband. As the fateful day drew near, more and more people decided they could do just as well without their dearly departed. Finally, the chief magistrate had to intervene on behalf of the citizens of Lyon, entreating the mountebank not to go through with his plan. "In justice, however, to your rare and*

*divine talents,” avowed the official, “I shall give you an attestation in due form under our seal that you **can revive the dead** and that it was **our fault** we were not eyewitnesses to your powers.” And so Mantacinni safely left town, his pockets lined with gold. [John H. Townsen, **Clowns**, 49-50]*

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The Passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple, Jesus found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business.

The Passover was a sacred day. In the Seder, the youngest child in the family begins the celebration of the Passover meal by asking the question, Why is this night different from all others? And then they told the story of the exodus. It commemorated the decisive action of God on behalf of Hebrew slaves in Egypt to set them free and bring them out of the land of their bondage.

As God led the people through the wilderness, he made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. The terms of the covenant began: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.* God had taken the action to free them before they did anything at all, before anything was asked of them at all. It was an act of unqualified grace.

In the commandments that follow, the people hear how they can express their gratitude for God’s grace. It was the Law that gave the people the means of expressing thanksgiving. Far from being meant as a burden, they were to be a daily remembrance of God’s goodness to them. The way the psalmist understood it was this: *The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart....* [Psalm 19:7-8]

As their practice of God’s law developed, they interpreted the law and came up with more and more laws to obey. And, generally, obedience to the law became more and more tedious and less and less able to revive the soul, rejoice the heart, or make anyone wise. Less and less they engaged their hearts and minds, their passion and wisdom, in living as God’s people. Their rituals became rote, and technical compliance replaced earnest devotion.

At Passover, only animals without blemish were acceptable for sacrifice on this holy occasion. And the priests of the temple certified which animals were without blemish. For those who traveled, it was more convenient to buy their sacrificial animals from the temple where the animals had already been certified. Increasingly, all who came to the temple from near or far found that only temple animals were certified as being without blemish.

The temple tax that was paid at Passover could, by interpretation of the law, only be paid in shekels, which was a coinage no longer used in commerce. Only the temple had shekels and, for a fee, those in the temple exchanged common currency for the shekels.

The temple became a marketplace, and Passover, an occasion for profit. They practiced their rituals on the cheap, watered them down to a comfortable level, and lined their pockets with gold.

They had become, like mountebanks, religious hucksters, peddling God’s mysteries.

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When Paul came to Corinth, he was at risk of using his own kind of religious hucksterism. He was a Pharisee who knew the Jews were looking for a sign. He had just come from Athens and knew the Greeks looked for the well-reasoned argument. He could have used either to make his pitch.

Even Jesus faced the temptation of a religious huckster in the wilderness. One way of understanding the temptations is that the temptation to turn the stones into bread is the promise of false prosperity. *Follow me, and your needs will be provided for effortlessly. Send a contribution to become a partner in my ministry as seed money for your miracle and you will be blessed many times over.*

When I was growing up, I remember hearing about and listening on the radio to an evangelist in Charlotte. He started a church there that has become a denomination of about 3.5 million members. The church he started has about 10,000 members today (over 40 years after his death). It performs mass baptisms once a year using fire hoses with the Charlotte firefighters using fog nozzles to spray a fine mist.

The evangelist was Bishop C. M. Grace, known as *Sweet Daddy Grace*. The mantra I remember associated with Sweet Daddy Grace was: *If you want to be blessed, you've got to invest.* In Sweet Daddy Grace. He didn't peddle snake oils or medicinal elixirs. He did, however, develop a line of products that included *Daddy Grace* coffee, tea, soaps, and hand creams that were reputed to have healing properties.

Of course, if our seed money does not yield a miracle, if we invest and are not blessed with prosperity, if our stones do not turn to bread, it is our faith that is not strong enough. And we might as well give the hucksters the attestation that they can produce the miracle and it is our fault that we are not eyewitnesses to their powers.

The temptation to leap from the pinnacle of the Temple without injury is the huckster's pitch that we will be exempted from the realities of life. Jesus healed people who eventually got sick again. Jesus raised Lazarus who eventually died. If Jesus had jumped that day and been spared, his way still led to the cross. It is tempting to believe that God would or should surround believers to protect us from harm. That is the temptation of the huckster with something to sell.

The temptation to rule the kingdoms of the earth is to claim an authority and use it to intimidate others. To offer an interpretation of scripture that is one's own and say, I'm not saying this, God is. To claim direct conversation with God about what others should do, which ends up being for one's own benefit.

Jesus was able to say *No* to the temptations. That did not end them for us. They're still around. Easy and false prosperity, exemption from the realities of life. That's not the story of Jesus.

Frederick Buechner says: *The story of Jesus is full of darkness as well as light. It is a story...of a mystery we must never assume we understand and that it comes to us breathless and broken with unspeakable beauty at the heart of it yet by no means a pretty story though that is the way we are apt to peddle it much of the time. We sand down the rough edges. We play down the obscurities and contradictions. What we can't explain, we explain away. ... "But we are the aroma of Christ," Paul says, and the story we are given to tell is a story that smells of his life in all its aliveness, and our commission is to tell it in away that makes it come alive as a story in all its aliveness and to make those who hear it come alive and God knows to make ourselves come alive too.* [Frederick Buechner, *Two Stories, A Room Called Remember*, 51]

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Those in the temple had become hucksters, peddling God's mysteries. So, making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

The other gospels place the cleansing of the temple during Holy Week. It could help explain why those who cheered him on Sunday would call for his death on Friday.

The gospel of John tells the story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is not a story to explain why those in Jerusalem killed Jesus. For John, such explanations are irrelevant. John seems to want it to be clear that Jesus' life was not taken from him; he laid it down, and, on Easter, picked it up again.

The cleansing of the temple, as John tells it, explains little of the people. It reveals God. It is a Passover story.

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Paul tells us that Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. So when Jesus cleansed the temple, the authorities asked, "What sign have you for doing this?"

And he gave them the ultimate Passover sign. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

They answered, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

Of course, Jesus was talking of his own body. It was the temple where God was truly worshiped. And they did not understand. They used the same logic that brought sheep, cattle, doves, and money-changers into the temple.

And the story is as well as story of a conflict in values between those who seek to control their relationship with God, who reshape God's word to fit themselves rather than reshaping themselves to fit God's word, who peddle God's word so its demands are no greater or different from what is comfortable and those who kneel in God's presence and listen and take that perspective into their lives, who take with them from that meeting the fragrance of Christ.

With Christ as our sanctuary, we know what church buildings are and what they are not.

And we know the sign is Christ our Passover sacrificed for us and Christ our Savior raised up in three days.