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# Getting Our Priorities Straight



A Sermon By  
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Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/2018-03-04-AWW.mp3>.

## Coming Clean

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Last First Sunday in Lent  
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Exodus 20:1-17  
John 2:13-20

Every time I hear today's Gospel reading, the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, I imagine someone there having a cell phone. They pull it from their pocket and, unbeknownst to Jesus, record the whole episode, as he chases people around the Temple, snaps the whip, overturns tables. The next thing you know, the video's gone viral, and it's all over the internet... because the cleansing of the temple is that kind of story. It's a little shocking, a little scandalous. The story seems to reveal another side of Jesus, one we haven't seen before. Jesus appears angry, crazy even, almost possessed. He's yelling and screaming, running around the Temple like a madman. What was he thinking? What was he doing?

To make sense of it all, we have to remember Jesus had a consuming passion for God. Jesus loved God more than anything else in the whole world. His relationship with God was the most important thing in his life, and Jesus wanted that to be true for other people, as well. Jesus wanted people to love God the way God loved them. He believed God should be at the center of everyone's life, that knowing God and loving God should be a top priority, and that everything else in life should flow from their relationship with God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," Jesus would say. "This is the first and greatest commandment."

That day in the Temple, though, Jesus could see people weren't focused on God at all. The Temple was the center of Jewish culture and faith. It was considered the dwelling place of God. And, the people of Israel were about to celebrate Passover, one of the most important festivals of the year. Yet, as Jesus entered the Temple, he could tell people weren't paying attention to God one bit. They weren't worshipping or praying. They were too busy looking at everything else – the cattle, the sheep, the doves, the moneychangers at their tables. Here were these people were in the house of God, about to celebrate the most holy days of their faith, and they didn't seem to care about God in the least. It was like God was relegated to some other part of the temple, some other time of the year, or some other part of their lives. God just wasn't a priority, and so Jesus got upset: "Get these things out of here!" he shouted. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Everyone has priorities in life, those things which are most important to us. Beginning at an early age, we develop a sense of what we cherish and value, and over time, many of those things will stay the same, but some of them will change, as we learn and grow, as we discover what aspects of our life make us feel happy and fulfilled, as we figure out what part of our life need attention and focus. For some, health, wellness and peace of mind is a priority – it's important to take care of ourselves. For others, it's relationships, spending time with the people we love and the people who love us. And then, there are those for whom work takes top billing, having a career and being successful, moving up the corporate ladder.

No matter who we are, though, at some point in life, we all lose track of our priorities, or we get our priorities all mixed up. We almost can't help ourselves. We're all so busy and overcommitted – it's easy to lose track of what really matters. We get distracted by our to-do lists and spend all of our time running around, just trying to keep up. We tell ourselves there will always be time later on, to fix those things that need fixing, to find the right person, go on that trip of a lifetime, to make those changes we know will make us happy. So, we don't focus right now on the who and the what that really matters, at least not as much as we would like, or not as much as we probably should.

What are your priorities in your life? What's most important to you? If I were to ask to take a pen, pull out your bulletin and write down the four things you really want to focus on and give your energy to, right here and right now, at this point in time, what would you put down?

Then, what I really want to know is: Would God be on your list? Is your relationship with God a priority?

A few weeks ago, my wife, Susan, had to do this very sort of exercise. She was attending a company retreat, and as part of their "ice breaker," everyone around the room had to describe themselves in four phrases, so others could get a sense of who you were, what you did, what you valued, and what was most important to you. As Susan recounted this to me afterwards, I naturally had to ask her, "So, what did you say?"

"I told them I was a civil engineer, a project manager for big infrastructure projects, the mother of three boys, and an avid NY Mets fan."

And, I was like, "Well, that's great, but what about me?"

To which Susan responded, "Oops."

When it comes to setting our priorities, the same thing happens with God sometimes – we forget to put God on the list. We don't intend for it to be that way. Most of us want to have God at the center of our lives. That's why we all made it to church today, and some of us even brought our kids, which is no easy thing. But, there are times when it feels like God gets relegated only to Sundays. We leave church with a good sense of God's presence, but by the middle of the week, we're consumed with work, and family, and all the busyness and responsibilities of life, that it's easy to forget about God. We don't think about God that much, or speak with God that much, or pray to God that much. Like the people in the Temple, we're just paying attention to everything else. And, God becomes an "oops."

The good news is no matter who we are, or what we are doing, no matter how much attention we're paying to God, or not paying to God, God always makes us a priority. Each and every one of us is important to God, and God is constantly focused on us, watching us and listening for us, just waiting for us to reach out.

And, the Bible tells us it's always been this way. We always take top billing. We always come in first. From the very beginning, you, and me, and all of creation have been at the very top of God's list.

In our Old Testament reading, we heard God share the Ten Commandments with the people of Israel. For those of us living in the 21st century, it would be easy to think of the Ten Commandments as some ancient to-do list for living a good life, that they describe the way God wants us to live, and while that is partially true, there is actually much more to the Ten Commandments, because the Commandments were actually a sign of God's special relationship with the people of Israel. They were a sign of God's love, commitment, and dedication.

Thousands of years before Jesus, God made a covenant with the people of Israel. God said I will make you a top priority, and you make me a top priority. That covenant lasted for thousands of years, and when God led the people out of their bondage in Egypt, God wanted to recommit to the covenant. God wanted to remind the people once again of how important they were to God, and so God gave the people of Israel the Ten Commandments as a gift, as a sign of their special relationship. Living according to the Commandments, then, was a way for the Israelites to show God that God was a priority for them – that that God was one of the most important things in their life. And, over time, the people of Israel realized making God a priority had a huge impact on their lives. Focusing on God and paying attention to God made their lives better and more fulfilling. It brought benefits they couldn't possibly imagine because God was always there, as a part of their lives, in the forefront of their minds. God was always a priority, and it made a big difference.

The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to get our priorities straight, to think about what's most important to us, and then, devote our time, and our energy, and our resources towards those things – not just say they're important but actually live like they're important.

And, Lent is an opportunity for us to focus on God, to ask ourselves if our relationship with God a priority, and if it is, to do something about it – not just say God is on our list but actually live like God is on our list. It will make all the difference in the world.

Amen.