

“Turn Around”

Psalm 19:7-14, John 2:13-22

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Last week, while I was driving through an intersection, I saw a yellow light so I stopped and waited for the green light. My older son Jacob who was seated in the back asked me a question, “Daddy, why is there a yellow light?” I simply told him that when the yellow light turns, we have to stop and wait for the green light. To be honest with you, I wasn’t for sure what exactly the driver has to do when the light turns yellow. Stop? Wait? Or is it a driver’s call to go or stop depending on its situation? I researched the internet for the right answer. Here is a reminder for your safe driving. The answer is simple: STOP. According to the law, every driver has to stop at a yellow light unless he or she is too close to the intersection to stop safely. So, how you define “too close” to the intersection is that if you are 100 feet or less from the intersection, you have passed the “point of no return” and cannot stop safely before the intersection. The words, STOP, WAIT and CAUTION have lingered in my mind during this week. The season of Lent is like a “yellow light” that makes us to think carefully about our relationship with and our pathway to God.

In our New Testament reading, Jesus truly turned on a “yellow light” to make people in the temple listen to “God’s wake-up call”. Jesus called all merchants, moneychangers and even high priests to change their mindsets, stop and turn around their religious business. Jesus didn’t only confront merchants and moneychangers at the temple in Jerusalem, but he also challenges us all to rethink our God. This morning, I invite us to explore this question together: What would Jesus challenge each of us to “stop” and ask for any “changes” in our attitude to God?

Let me briefly remind you of what happened to Jesus. Every year around the season of Passover, thousands of Jewish pilgrims from all parts of the world came to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice and pay the temple tax. The temple was always busy with transactions and retailers taking advantage of the opportunity to sell animals for the ritual sacrifice. An historical background about the Passover in the temple is that pilgrims carried coins from their home towns, most bearing the images of Roman emperors or Greek gods, which Temple authorities considered idolatrous. The high priest ordered that only Tyrian shekels would be accepted for the annual half-shekel Temple tax because they

contained a higher percentage of silver, so the money changers exchanged unacceptable coins for these shekels. Of course, they extracted a profit, sometimes much more than the law allowed. The high priest received a percentage of the profit from the money changers and merchants. Because pilgrims were unfamiliar with Jerusalem, the Temple merchants sold sacrificial animals at a higher price than elsewhere in the city.¹ The high priest overlooked their dishonesty, as long as he got his share. Pastor Bob Kaylor from Park City, Utah says: “The outer courtyard of the most holy place in the most holy city had been turned into a kind of walk-in convenience store.”

When Jesus arrived at the temple in Jerusalem, he saw the moneychangers along with merchants who were selling animals for sacrifice. Jesus was keenly aware what the problem was in the temple. Animals were needed for the ritual sacrifice, but now selling animals is a more important business than the ritual sacrifice. Literally, the temple was not a holy place anymore, but already turning into a market place! The money became an idol in the temple. What Jesus reacted to in the temple was quite radical. Literally Jesus put together a whip out of strips of leather and chased people out of the Temple. He told the merchants, “Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall!” Jesus was outraged and upset because he saw that they were not interested in worshipping but doing business. They were more focused on profit than on prayer. What Jesus couldn’t tolerate and triggered his extreme radical emotion was that people had created a false god.

What about us? Do you and I believe in a right god? Pastor Linda Loessberg-Zahl², challenges us with these reflective self-examination questions: It’s difficult to look honestly at the things we make like God in our lives, to openly admit that much of the time we’ve got the wrong god. So what do you and I put before God in our lives? What are your small or large idols?

Frederick Buechner, the author of the book, *Wishful Thinking* puts it this way: “Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Under certain circumstances, money, patriotism, sexual freedom, moral principles, family loyalty, physical beauty, social or intellectual preeminence, and so on are fine things to have around; but to make them your masters, to look to them to justify your life and save your soul is sheerest folly. They just aren’t up to it.” In other words, idols are the things we value more than God, things

¹ <http://christianity.about.com/od/New-Testament/a/JZ-Money-Changers.htm>

² Her sermon, *the Sermon that I didn’t want to Preach*, March 19, 2006 at Centennial UMC

other than God that we believe will give us a sense of importance; things other than God that we think will save us in the end. What in your life do you believe in more than God? What gets between you and your love of God? We all have something.

First of all, there are the small and large idols that are all about “ME”. In 1985, a sociologist, Robert N. Bellah and his fellows published a best-selling book, called *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. It was the early warning cry of how fragmented and individualistic we were becoming, even when it came to religion. Bellah described the phenomenon of individualism in America even in matters of faith. One of the most famous passages was an interview of a woman named Sheila: “Sheila Larson was a young nurse who... describes her faith as ‘Sheilaism’.” This suggests the logical possibility of more than 235 million American religions, one for each of us. "I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. In defining what she calls "my own Sheilaism," she said: "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself."³ Self-centeredness and egoism slowly and gradually are replacing our center with these false gods in our hearts. But we know that we cannot save ourselves.

Secondly, what about our society? Anthony B. Robinson sarcastically argues that consumerism has become a kind of alternate faith, a religion of sorts in our society.⁴ Religions are characterized by some vision of a good life, by their rituals and by a particular language. Consumerism seems to be developing all three. Consumerism's vision of the good life is the gaining of goods and experiences. Consumerism also has its own rituals that form and promote consumer character. The acquisition of credit cards and debit cards by the young has become some sort of rite of passage. The Friday after Thanksgiving is consumerism's high holy day, the No. 1 shopping day of the year. How much we shop during the Christmas season is an indicator of our national health. Television offers the liturgy of consumerism 24/7, and wonder of wonders, we consent to having it piped into our homes! For faith and religion, the crowning

³ http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm, accessed 9-6-13.

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<http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Articles-of-Faith-Consumerism-is-a-greedy-1263940.php> by Anthony B. Robinson, a guest columnist published Feb.8, 2008

virtue is love. For consumerism, self-regard would lead the list. No. 2 would be joy with the associated notion of contentment. Yet for consumerism, discontent is essential. One must be in a constant state of anxiety about keeping up, having the newest and the latest. Virtue No. 3 of the spiritual life is peace and harmony with others. But for consumerism, envy is to be preferred. Finally, religion has understood self-control, imagine that, as a virtue. The good consumer learns the virtue of impulse buying.

Jesus is earnestly calling and challenging us to stop and examine ourselves. If we have wronged God, he asks us to turn away from a false God, be cautious and change our direction back to the real God. What Jesus showed us in the temple was a “spiritual yellow light” for our special attention. A yellow light can be any personal time to be with God in solitude. Solitude is not loneliness, but an intentional moment to be with God and to seek God’s guidance. Time and location are not the matter. Your genuine and honest heart is the heart of solitude. Paul Tillich, a famous theologian says that the word "loneliness" talks about the pain of being alone, but the word "solitude" expresses the glory of being alone.” Henri J. M Nouwen, a spiritual master says, “Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self.” Accumulation enslaves us and possesses us –accumulation of things, honors, compliments. The reality is that the more things we accumulate, the more anxiety we feel about protecting them. In this special season of Lent, I hope and pray that you will take your own time of solitude as your “spiritual yellow light” to be awake spiritually and to see the right thing for your life. Amen.