

sermon-3/15/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Cleaning House”
John 2:13-22
By Jim Patten

Pretend, if you would, that you lived in the first century of the common era and you knew nothing about Jesus. Now pretend you came across John’s gospel. This was the only source you had with information about Jesus. It starts out very philosophical with those soaring words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

But the next thing you know your are reading about a wedding feast. Jesus is there. He doesn’t say much. But what he does say is rather strange. What he does is even more strange. He makes more wine so that those at the wedding feast who are already drunk have even more to drink!

The next thing we see is Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus barges in seemingly in a violent rage turning over tables and driving out animals with a whip of cords. This is certainly not a picture of a gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Jesus does not even come across as very balanced and certainly not as a peacemaker. The only scripture John can come up with to describe Jesus is from Psalm 69, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Jesus is being described as one eaten up, consumed by his passion!

What is John trying to do with this introduction of Jesus? It is clear, as one commentator noted, that John wants to state right off the bat that Jesus came to clean house. Jesus’ actions speak a whole lot louder than any words he could have said. He goes right to the center of the worship life of Israel and causes a stir, cleans up all that got in the way of worship, all that made what was insignificant the center of attention.

That is a great Lenten theme, is it not? Lent is all about cleaning house, cleaning up the temple of our own beings as it were, cleaning up all that gets in the way of our worshipping God, all that gets in the way of our relationship with God. Whether the problem is our being overly busy, consumed by consumerism, or being so irritated by the small stuff that we can’t give our best energies to the big stuff, we all could use a little internal house cleaning.

So, as we head ever deeper into Lent this year, we will want to pay attention to this story. It is not as straightforward as it appears on the surface. There is more going on here than just an angry Jesus making a mess in the holiest place in Jerusalem.

First, it is important to realize those money changers and those selling animals for sacrifice are doing so in the outer courts of the Temple. They were not doing something wrong. They are performing a legitimate service. Jews could not make donations in the Temple with money that had Caesar’s picture on it. They had to exchange the Roman money for a more appropriate Jewish coin.

And, if they were supposed to sacrifice an unblemished animal, and they came from a long distance away, it would be hard to bring an animal that far and have it remain unblemished. They did not have to worry about doing that, because they could purchase an animal right at the Temple. All of this was good and proper.

The issue came with how this service was carried out. The money changers were known to charge an exorbitant exchange fee, thus cheating those poor rubes who came from the countryside to the Temple, perhaps for the first time in their lives. They were taking advantage of the less fortunate. The wealthy were profiting at the expense of the poor.

And, when the money changers and those who sold animals set up shop, they set up in the Court of the Gentiles. This was the place that non-Jews could come to worship. They were not allowed in the Temple sanctuary. But, when they came to worship they had to put up with bleating animals and all the noise from the monetary transactions. It was virtually impossible for non-Jews to worship in the only part of the Temple available to them. Such abuses drove Jesus wild.

It was how they carried on their legitimate business that bothered him. To put this in more modern terms, someone once compared these Jewish business people to those in the Christian church who knew how to fill the pews and how to meet capital campaign goals. Believe me, there is nothing wrong with church growth folks, or those who help churches with capital campaigns. I thank God for those folks all the time.

But, when church growth and raising money for buildings become an end in themselves, it is a problem. The cart is put before the horse. Unfortunately the Church seems to always be in danger of putting the cart before the horse, giving insignificant issues top priority while ignoring, or giving short shrift to what should be the center of our attention.

Frederick Buechner once said, "There is no better proof for the existence of God than the way year after year (God) survives the way (God's) professional friends treat (God)!" God survives the Church, in other words. God survives all the ways we trivialize the sacred, all the ways we distort true spirituality by empty rituals and our pompous religiosity.

We can't help but ask in our day where our religion gets in the way of an authentic relationship with God. Where is Christianity itself, or at least some forms of it, a problem? Herb O'Driscoll has said that behind all religious systems stands Jesus. He is the judge of all systems, even Christianity, warning us about all the ways our religion and its beloved practices get in the way of true worship and faithful discipleship.

When we say we are a follower of Jesus, we are saying we follow one whose passion for God and God's house is so great, he is almost consumed by it. Such passion does not shy away from controversy or making prophetic statements. To say that Jesus is Lord is to say we are willing to have some of that same passion. It won't always make us easy to live with. It won't always make the church conflict free.

I heard the story of a retiring minister who got up to speak at his retirement dinner. He said, "I want to thank Jesus Christ for making me into the person I am. Without Jesus, I might have been normal."

When normal means doing business as usual even when it interferes with our relationship with God it is not necessarily a good thing to be normal. When normal means turning a blind eye to injustice because it is too big a hassle to do anything or that is just the way things have always been done, it is not a good thing to be normal. When normal means letting the church get stuck on petty arguments and side distractions because that just seems to go with being part of a church, then maybe it is not a good thing to be normal.

I came across a prayer one commentator wrote in response to this passage in John. It is not a safe prayer. It hits pretty close to home. It seems a prayer worthy of the Jesus we encounter in these first two chapters of John's gospel, a Jesus who cleans house. I'd like to close with it now.

"Lord Jesus, come to our church this day. If our front door is locked, kick it open. If we are too cold or aloof, set us on fire. If our preacher goes on too long, shut him up. If we talk about everything except what is important, force us to confront the truth. If we become so concerned about the mere survival of our church at the expense of the mission of our church, take it from us and tear it down. If we hunker down behind our sacred walls, push down the walls and drive us out into a world where you are Lord of all. You are Lord of all, including the church. Help us never to forget that truth, even when it hurts. Amen"