



“Cleaning House”
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St. Andrew’s United Methodist Church
San Antonio, Texas
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John 2:13-22

It has been a difficult weekend for me. Things that have happened in our church’s life that some of you may or may not be aware of have affected me and what I had planned to say with this passage of scripture doesn’t apply any longer. Such is the working of the Spirit to most preachers.

It seems this passage of scripture comes at a very appropriate time. We’re in the season of Lent. In the midst of the season of Lent we are called as Christian Disciples to introspectively reflect on who we are and our faith journey individually and together. This passage of scripture I think is extremely timely for all of us in the twenty-first century who call ourselves Christian. It seems that Passover, the normal time for good God fearing Jews to go to Jerusalem to celebrate and to remember, to reflect indeed, about who they are, what God has done for them in the Exodus story to remember how God’s spirit passed over those houses that were so marked according to scripture and spared those lives. It is a reflection of the salvation of God this season of Passover that Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate and in so reflecting what Jesus saw when he came to town and walked into the temple, the pinnacle, the epitome of what the salvation has brought to this people and he sees that it’s turned into a barnyard. Not to say that animals are unholy, that animals are evil, but this one place, this temple, this house of worship had become a mall, a shopping center, a feedlot, a.... but Jesus cleanses the temple.

Now that story is not new. We know that story. We’ve heard that story since we were oh that high. Jesus came in and cleansed the temple and he said “My house shall be a house of prayer, but you’ve made it a den of thieves.” We know that story because it’s old. It’s ancient. It’s something that we’ve experienced. And we anticipate it this time of year when we start looking at what’s coming in the next couple weeks here as we inch toward Palm Sunday and Holy Week and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. And all those things that seem to bring the church into a deep reflection. We remember that it was Jesus’ passion toward the temple that made him such a hated person amongst the leadership of the Jewish people.

Ironically this story is in all four Gospels. In John’s Gospel, however, it’s in a different place. In the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke you’ll find this story of the cleansing of the temple just after Palm Sunday. It is right in that same time frame as Holy Week. It’s late in his ministry. It’s in the third year of his ministry. It’s, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, the last straw. It’s what pushed Jesus over the edge and the Jewish Leadership had to do something about him. Not so in John’s Gospel, it’s in Chapter 2, it’s in the very beginning. As a matter of fact, there is only one thing that Jesus has really done of any significance here and it’s clouded in mystery and that was the wedding feast at Cana, remember that? It was at the very beginning of Chapter 2. Jesus and his friends were partying, they’re having a good time at a wedding and they run out of wine. You know you just don’t do that at a good wedding and Jesus’ mother comes to him and says, “uh, you need to do something because they’re getting embarrassed.” And Jesus said, “but my time hasn’t yet come” and she says to these other stewards, “do whatever he tells you.”

Bizarre strange story followed by the Passover where Jesus goes to Jerusalem and cleanses the temple and he says “stop making my Father’s house a marketplace, stop turning this place into something that it’s not.” Early in the ministry, John has Jesus making enemies, and the disciples will remember Psalm 69, Verse 9: “It is zeal for your house that has consumed me.” Zeal - an over abundance of love and passion and compassion; a willingness to do anything to preserve; to bless

and sanctify; to bring about. Jesus cleanses the temple and he drives out what needed to be driven out. He drives out those things that have come to be commonplace, ordinary, accepted, standard operating procedure. Now they were selling animals that were to be offered in the temple for sacrifices. You got to have an animal to make a sacrifice. Where are you going to get an animal? It just so happens we've got them here. They were also changing Roman and Greek coins, coins that had other people's faces on them. You remember that law about you shall not make a graven image. Exchanging those at a good rate, not a bad rate, a good rate for the shekel that's accepted in the temple as the temple tax. There's nothing wrong with these things except they had taken the house of prayer and made it a business. They had forgotten why the temple existed. It's not about the animals because you know when you have a whole bunch of animals out front of the temple, now I wasn't in agriculture but I know a little bit about it, I know that it takes an awful lot of feed to keep... Paul, you've got cows, how much feed does it take to keep one cow alive? That's right, a lot - especially in a drought. It takes water to keep these critters alive and healthy and blemish free to make them a suitable offering. You know, that's overhead. Now let's think about this, you've got all these animals outside the temple and that's overhead. You've got to keep them alive so that they are acceptable so that folks will come and purchase them to offer them to the temple, to God.

At what point did the temple lose its vision of being the place where people come to praise God? The setting of the story is important in John, because like I said, they want there to be no misunderstanding, Jesus is going to upset the status quo from the very beginning. He's going to be different. He's not going to be your typical prophet. He's not going to be your typical anything. But the setting of the temple and the setting of the cleansing of the temple early in John's Gospel reminds us that early in Lent what are the things that we're becoming preoccupied with, all of the overhead that we've got to maintain just to keep things running. In our own spiritual life, if this is God's temple what are the things that we're so encumbered with that we've forgotten who we are and more importantly whose we are?

I think the story of the cleansing of the temple is extremely helpful for us, especially in this time of Lent because we need to reflect on these things personally and corporately. What are the things in this church that we need to relieve ourselves from to chase out of this community of believers so that we can once again focus on what it means to be The Church? I think there are two things, minimum, to start with. The first one is our attitudes and we've got some. Every church does. I think the church as a whole has attitudes. It's been said that the United Methodist Church, you know if the 1950's every come around again, we're going to be ready because that's exactly where we are. We're still operating out of a 1950's mindset and I don't mean St. Andrew's, I mean the whole United Methodist Church. The attitudes that church is really just for me and it's what I get out of it. How many times have you ever gone to a worship service and...you know I didn't get anything out of that worship service today. We've all heard that said. Some of us maybe even have said it, but the attitude that church is for me is one of the things that needs to be cleansed from our temple. Another attitude is that the church is my spare tire. My faith is a spare tire, that is, I only need it when I'm in emergency and in a crises situation. That's when you pull it out and you dust it off and you hope that it's still good and then you slap it on there and you get to the next stop and get things back in line and life seems to go on and then you throw it back in the trunk. The attitude that church or faith is nothing more than a spare tire for use behind glass, break glass in case of emergency. It's like you got a Bible back there not a fire extinguisher. Or the fact that our attitudes are that people ought to come here, people ought to do what we're doing, what we've been doing for a long time because that's what this is all about, the church ought to be... The wonderful attitude and I've heard it so many times in meetings not just in this congregation but in every congregation that I've served, it's the same cry - you know if we just had 50 more people in this church we could

afford to do... paint the place, fix up the yard, put a new roof on, fill out the organ, go down the list. It's that overhead thing again. If we just had 50 more people here who were giving regularly we could afford to buy the feed for the cows that we need to have to slaughter in the temple and see they would last longer that way and we could.... Attitudes really are hurting the church in the twenty-first century.

The other one is our beliefs. We have a lot of beliefs that are confused, beliefs that well everybody ought to come here. Everybody ought to come here to get ministry. Everybody ought to be in this place to get ministry. Everybody ought to be coming to fill these pews because this is where ministry happens. Beliefs that church is only for Sunday mornings and that church is what you do on Sunday mornings because that's who we are, that's what we do on Sunday mornings. Church is here in this location on these 7.98 net acres with these nine buildings all around us and the light fixtures that flicker and the heating that sometimes gets off kilter and the air-conditioning that's not quite cool enough when it needs to be and the belief that this is what church is, that these facilities are what church is, that how did he say it, Kaitlyn read it so well, he said, "are you serious? What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" and they said, "are you serious? This temple has been under construction for forty-six years and you'll raise it up in three days?"

They don't get it, do they? For them the temple is the building. For Jesus the temple is the identification of a people with God and God with a people. For them it's bricks and mortar. For Jesus it's relationship. Is it the same for us? Is that what church is? Is church nothing more than a paint job and a new shingled roof and plumbing where it needs to be repaired and new air-conditioners where they need... Is that what church is? Is church nothing more than the series of programs that we offer that we're supposed to offer because they've come down the pike from on high from the Bishop's office and so on and so forth? Is church really nothing more than having Sunday School because we've always done it that way? Is church nothing more than doing the things, going through the motions that we've always gone through because that's what we believe and our actions don't lie?

Jesus talks about going out into the world and reaching people where they are. He sent them out in all four Gospels. He sent them out especially in Luke. He sent them out in pairs and said go to all these places and share with them the Good News and if they want to hear it, bless them and if they don't want to hear them, bless them anyway and tell them they just heard it whether they like it or not and move on. The early church with Paul, Paul used to go around to community after community after community setting up an organization of people in relationship helping one another to stay faithful to God, not to build buildings, not to maintain the status quo, not to continue what we've always done. For Paul the ministry of the Gospel was about, how is it with your soul? How is it with your soul? How's your relationship with God coming along? Are you where you need to be? Are you where God is calling you to be? Do you know what God has done for you? Do you know what Christ has done for you and do you know that the Spirit is here to help you?

Jump ahead some 1600 years and you'll find a fellow by the name of John Wesley, maybe 1700 years, and he's going to organize small groups of people because he's looking at the church itself and he's wondering what happened here. Go back a couple hundred years and you find Martin Luther and he's asking the same question to the church. What happened here? Why is it that we're so hung up on the animals and so hung up on the exchange rates that we've forgotten why we're here? What's going on? Shouldn't we be about the business of saving souls? Shouldn't we be about the business of meeting people in the streets and in the work places and in the schools and in the jobs and in the stores and everywhere else, the market places and sharing with them that we love them and that God loves them and that God wants a relationship with them? Shouldn't that be the business of

the church? Why is it we're so hung up on overhead? Oh, I know, I know, we got to have overhead because otherwise we'll have red ink in our bulletin and we really hate it when we have red ink in our bulletins because you know... well red ink doesn't show up on a Risograph on the one page so we have to do it in parentheses but you can see it there, it's still there. And suddenly the ministry of the church isn't about how is it with your soul, it's about "if we just had a few more people we could afford to maintain this place."

Have we lost our vision? More importantly, have we lost our soul? Have we forgotten what it means to be the church? If so, we've got to start cleaning house and it starts here in the heart, in the soul. That's who we are in the church. That's who we're called to be. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!