

Cleaning House

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near,
and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves,
and the money changers seated at their tables.

Making a whip of cords,
he drove all of them out of the temple,
both 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!”

His disciples remembered that it was written,
“Zeal for your house will consume me.”

The Jews then said to him,
“What sign can you show us for doing this?”

Jesus answered them,
“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

The Jews then said, “This temple
has been under construction for forty-six years,
and will you raise it up in three days?”

But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

After he was raised from the dead,
his disciples remembered that he had said this;
and they believed the scripture
and the word that Jesus had spoken.

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March 3, 2024

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I.

The story before us today, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is, to use the Latin, something of a *sui generis* text, or, of its own kind. This is, arguably, one of the few, if only time in scripture that we see Jesus using physical force. Though it might be easy to make the assumption that Jesus was angry or violent, and give credence to the notion of righteous anger, the scripture does not, explicitly, bear this out. Suffice to say, though, that Jesus was, indeed, *emphatic* about the nature of the Temple, or "His Father's House," as he calls it, and zealous in protecting it.

II.

The truth of such an event actually having occurred in the life of Jesus, is given traction by virtue of the fact that each of the Gospel writers includes an account of the Temple cleansing. The Synoptic Gospels, however, place this event at the *end* of his ministry, just prior to his arrest, whereas John's account comes in the first year of his ministry immediately subsequent to the miracle of the Epiphany. This has given rise to Synoptic accounts being referred to as the so called "Second Cleansing," while the Johannine account is referenced as the "First Cleansing." That there is a disparity of timing and order between the Synoptics and John is really of little consequence. More noteworthy, by any instrument of measure, is that *all* of the Gospel writers considered this a matter of such weight that *each* included it in *their* version of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

III.

Now, before we get into the possible relevance of this passage for our lives (and I have a bit of an interesting, if not obvious, idea about that which we will get to in a bit) some background to the story is helpful. There is, as it turns out, a perfectly reasonable explanation for the animals and money changers in the Temple that day; or, more accurately, in that *outer* part of the Temple known as the "Court of the Gentiles"; so named, because this was the only

section of the Temple into which Gentiles were permitted. Though still considered “holy,” this area was somehow understood to be “less holy” compared to the increasingly “more holy” areas which were encountered the further into the Temple one went; with the most holy place, called “the Holy of Holies,” being reserved for only the High Priests, and only on certain occasions.

IV.

The Court of the Gentiles, then, was the *outer* ring of the Temple where the 300 to 400 thousand pilgrims who had made the journey to participate in the festival of the Passover would first arrive. The pressing issue for these pilgrims, was to purchase the prescribed animals required to fulfill the various acts of sacrificial atonement. Most of these pilgrims travelled great distances to get to Jerusalem, so it was far more convenient to purchase these animals upon arrival rather than transport them from home. Further, as these pilgrims were very often from far-off lands, and made use of different currencies, it was a necessary convenience to be able to exchange their funds for the currency in use in Jerusalem so that they might purchase the prescribed animals.

V.

These animal husbandmen and money changers which were in the Court of the Gentiles that day, were seen as a necessary and valuable part of the industry of religion and, so, they were there with the both the support and blessing of the Temple authorities. Given this, we must see Jesus’ actions as a rebuke not only of the people doing the *deals* but, also, of the people who fostered the culture of deal *making*. Though only the former were driven out, Jesus was speaking to all those who, as Jesus said, had made his Father’s house a market place.

Of course, the latter part of John’s account of these events is the real reason this passage finds its way into the lectionary readings for Lent: “*Destroy this Temple,*” says Jesus, “*and in three days I will raise it up.*” Jesus is prophesying his own, eventual death and resurrection; only understood by his followers, later, viewed through the lens of hindsight.

VI.

Having addressed the scriptural and theological aspects of the texts, I would now like to move onto the practical, that is to say pastoral, implications. Rather than only understanding the story of Jesus driving out the moneychangers from the temple as a metaphor for his *death* (which it is most certainly) I would also suggest we understand this story as a metaphor for our *life* (which it most certainly needs to be as well). The Temple in Jerusalem, referenced in today's reading, is comprised of five distinct and successive sections or areas; with the access to each of areas being increasingly restrictive. The outer most area was the Court of Gentiles, from which Jesus drove the moneychangers. Passing through this you would come to the Women's Court, with the Outer Court being next, after which was the Inner Court which, in turn, led to the Holy Place. Beyond these, was the area known as the Holy of Holies; where the Ark resided and where only a very few were allowed, and, as stated earlier, only on certain occasions.

VII.

Certainly, we might dismiss the differentiation of these areas as the function of a by-gone age and the trappings of a tradition to which we no longer subscribe. Further, we might rightly assert, as does the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3, that there is no longer a distinction between Jew or Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. For our purposes today, however, these considerations constitute the bath water; it is the baby in which we are most interested.

The layout of the Temple into distinct regions corresponds to an understanding that every aspect of life is comprised of two distinct parts which form some ratio relative to the other. While the Romanian religious historian Mircea Eliade called these the Sacred and the Profane, we need not go nearly as far, the Sacred and the Mundane will suffice. Better yet, so as to remove any notion of bias, let's just call them the Valued and the Invaluable.

VIII.

In an effort to bring this down to earth, let me give you an example from real life. It has been awhile since I have picked on Linda from the pulpit, so if only to rile up her vast hoard of ardent supporters in the congregation, I am going to tell you a story. Thursday morning Linda received a package from her

much beloved and respected college professor, Arleigh Parks (namesake of our son, Arlo) with whom Linda reconnected about a year ago. Now in her late 80s, Arleigh lives in San Diego and, as I mentioned in a previous sermon, last fall we drove over to New Hampshire so Linda could meet up with her after almost 40 years while Arleigh was on a Fall Color Excursion through New England. They now speak regularly on the phone and the last time they did so, Arleigh got talking about some of her jewelry, much of it costume, which had become all tangled together. Linda related to Arleigh she was pretty adept at untangling owing to her experience of staffing the Jewelry Table at our church's Fall Bazaar.

IX.

So it was that I arrived at the lake late Thursday evening after work to find Linda sitting at the dining room table sorting out this *massive* knot of jewelry. Linda had driven out earlier in the day to get us settled for the weekend and had a fire going in the fireplace when I arrived with the rare take-out dinner. I had stopped on the way to the newly opened Olde Dekalb Hotel; they have *outstanding* wings.

Now, before I continue with the story, I need to explain that beyond the fact that Linda is an excellent and adventurous cook, eating dinner together has always been of paramount importance to us as a family; it is a bit of sacred thing with us. With very rare exception, we sit down each night at a set table, hold hands and take turns saying grace and, then, share a lovingly prepared meal while talking about the day's events. This is something we did for the 25 years we were raising kids, and which we have continued even though it is now just the two of us empty-nesters. Except, that is, for this past Thursday evening.

X.

First thing I did when I arrived was to bring in the wings which Linda put in the already heated oven to stay warm. I unloaded the truck, changed into cozy clothes, and sat down to unwind a bit from a fairly hectic week of work. All the while, Linda kept working away at the knot of necklaces, chains and pins; which, by now, she had been at it for *hours*. Finally, at around 7:30, I got hungry so I told Linda I was going have a bowl of the very enticing salad she had prepared. Which I did, sitting across the table from her. Still, Linda persisted in her work. I took a little break after the salad and, then, seeing

that Linda was fully lost in the task at hand, moved on to the wings; with each of us sitting at the same table. This night, however, there would be no talk of the day's events. In fact, there was no talk *whatsoever*, Linda just kept untangling jewelry; *obsessively*. Eventually, I did dishes and retired to my recliner. A few minutes later I said to Linda, "You *know*, it is almost 8 o'clock." 30 minutes after *that*, Linda exclaimed, "I did it!, All untangled!"

XI.

I tell you this story because even for the most disciplined people with the very best intentions, what we deem Valuable is constantly encroaching upon and crowding-out even those things we hold Invaluable. Moreover, while the Invaluable tends to be rather static in scope, the Valuable is constantly growing and changing. Given the finite amount of time, energy and attention we have, this means there is always more which is Valuable that needs to be crammed into the same space it shares with the Invaluable. With that "space" being our daily lives.

Worse, all the while this is going on we rarely notice because, like the money changers in the temple, these other things *are* necessary and valuable to us. Over time, then, the ratio between Valuable and Invaluable becomes increasingly disproportional and unbalanced. The Invaluable, or that which we hold Sacred, is overtaken and overshadowed by the quotidian, or mundane aspects of our lives and, at such a point, becomes profane.

XII.

Which is why, every so often, we need to take stock of our lives and, like Jesus in the temple that day, which he understood to be his "Father's House," go about the business of cleaning our own house. Lent is a perfect time to do so. Imagine, if will, the Temple in Jerusalem as an analogy to our lives which is crammed full to overflowing with all that we, rightly, consider valuable: from frivolity to family, from that which distracts to that which we are devoted, and from what we might do to that which we must do. However, beyond all of this, buried deep within and at the center of our house, lies our Holy of Holies, our Invaluable: that is, our God, and our faith in that God. The problem is, owing to all the Valuable we keep amassing like hoarders, our house gets utterly cluttered such that we cannot even *get* to the Invaluable and the Invaluable has trouble *getting* to us.

XIII.

As we move through these weeks of Lent I would ask you to consider all that we deem Valuable in our life which, while perfectly reasonable, nonetheless prevents our Invaluable from shining through or, even, being found. Rather than seeing our lives as a crowded marketplace filled with people, things and ideas all vying for our time, attention and resources, let us remember that the whole purpose of the temple, and of our lives, is the creation of a home where the Holy of Holies might dwell.

We get to decide what we want to allow into the various courts of our lives, from outer to inner, how much is too much, and the ratio between what is Invaluable to us and what is merely Valuable to a greater or lesser degree. Yes, it certainly requires cleaning house every once and a while, and this might seem a little extreme to those at the business end of the broom, or the whip, but where the Invaluable is concerned zealouslyness is required. Amen.