

SPRING HOUSE CLEANING

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

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"In the temple (Jesus) found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changes 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 changes and overturned their tables." John 2:14-15.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

A temple had stood there for nearly a thousand years. Put that into historical perspective. A Presbyterian church has stood here for nearly 250 years and we think that's a long time. But, in the days of Jesus, a temple had stood on Mount Moorish for nearly a thousand years. The first had been built by King Solomon, King David's Son. His temple lasted nearly four hundred years until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. A second, smaller, and far less ornate temple was built about seventy years later. Old men and women who could remember the splendor of Solomon's temple wept when the second temple was dedicated. The third temple, built by King Herd, Jesus entered 46 years after construction had begun on it. Herd attempted to solidify support for his unpopular reign by building a temple to rival Solomon's. And it was a magnificent building. One writer said, "The one who has not seen the Temple of Herd has no idea of what a really beautiful building is."

When I was a child I envisioned the temple as a huge church building. I imagined the money changes and sellers of animals had their tables set up in the narthex. In reality they were outside in the open air in an area like our village Green across the street, in a public space, but clearly part of the temple precincts which covered an area larger than two football fields.

The temple held enormous significance for Israel. It was like the National Cathedral, the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, and the White House all in one. First, the Temple was the House of God. It symbolized the presence of God. And since there is only one God there was only one temple. It wasn't a synagogue or one of many other religious buildings. Second, it was the only place in the entire world authorized by God for sacrifices to be made. Third, the temple possessed enormous political significance. It was the symbol of Israel's nationhood.

All four gospels tell us that Jesus cleansed Herod's temple. John places the cleansing at the *beginning* of Christ's ministry, during the celebration of Passover when all Israel was expected to sacrifice at the temple. Some traveled great distances and were unable to bring their sacrificial animals. People needed a sacrificial animal to offer to God. So people brought their money and bought the animal when they got there. The law also required that no coin bearing pagan symbols could be used to pay the temple tax required of every male Jew. Money changes, for a fee, exchanged pagan money for *pure* temple money. So the merchants were offering an important service to devout worshippers.

John tells us that when Jesus found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changes seated at their tables he made a whip of cords and drove them out. He poured out the coins and overturned tables. He said, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Why did Jesus do this?

1. Was it, primarily, a protest against religious consumerism? Religious consumerism is a big business in America. Several weeks ago someone in an adult Sunday School class brought in a *Jesus Saves* air freshener he bought at the *Dollar General* store. Everybody felt it was tacky. Some felt it was down right blasphemous. But is it so different from a finely crafted, ornate silver cross? Isn't the difference more a matter of taste and class than anything else? I ordered a clerical collar last week because mine is falling apart. "Would I like the Pontiff style which is one and a half inches wide or do you prefer the one inch collar? Would I be interested in the *Friar Tuck* shirt that has the same fine tailoring with a full clerical collar." What about a Jesus T-shirt or a *WWJD* bracelet? Then I started raising questions about our own practices. Should we charge non-members to use the sanctuary for weddings? Should we sell grocery store gift certificates to raise money for youth programs? Should the fellowship hall be used for the annual *Lighthouse* auction that raises money for a ministry to street kids. At the last session meeting we decided to raise some money for the poor by selling Jean Webster cookbooks. We felt we shouldn't sell them in the narthex, but it was all right in the secretary's office. Is that

what the cleansing of the temple about? Religious consumerism and raising money for the poor and young people? I don't think so. In the words of Lutheran minister, Barbara Lundblad, the cleansing of the temple was not about playing Bingo in the church.

2) Or was the cleansing of the temple an expression of concern for social justice? We know Jesus loved the poor and oppressed. Maybe Jesus was furious that a poor person could bring his lamb for the Passover sacrifice only to be told by the gate-keepers that his lamb was unacceptable. He had to buy an authorized lamb. And maybe Jesus was angry because the money changers charged whatever they wanted for their service. Was Jesus protesting social injustice? Certainly Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets, was deeply concerned about social injustice, but the cleansing of the temple was not, primarily, about social injustice.

3) I believe the cleansing was, primarily, a dramatic symbol of the temple's fast approaching destruction and Christ's death and resurrection. I don't think the disciples realized this until after the resurrection. Then they realized what Jesus' death and resurrection was all about.

Like Isaiah who walked naked through the temple precincts to prophesy the destruction of Solomon's temple, Jesus, with prophetic symbolism, foretold the destruction of the temple and his own death and resurrection. In AD 70, the armies of Rome put down a nationalistic uprising in Palestine and utterly destroyed the temple. The sacrificial system came to an end. But the temple was no longer needed. Jesus is our Passover Lamb. Free! Doesn't cost us anything. "Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe." We don't need money changes. We don't need a temple. And God raised Jesus from the dead. The Risen Christ is our Temple. In him dwells the fullness of God. The Risen Christ breaks down the walls of nationalism that divide nations and people.

When I was preparing this sermon on Friday I heard a news broadcast that reminded me of the martyrdom of Oscar Roomer, the Archbishop of El Salvador, 20 years ago. What archbishop Roomer did in his cathedral was analogous to what Jesus did in the temple. On March 24th, 1980 Archbishop Roomer was suddenly shot dead while celebrating mass in the

chapel of the hospital where he lived. Days before he had addressed his congregation from the high altar in his cathedral. What he said and did led inexorably to his murder, just as the action of Jesus in his Father's House led to his crucifixion. The cathedral was packed with hundreds of worshipers, most of them middle and upper class men and women. Among the worshipers were soldiers and members of death squads. Death squads committed murder in the cities while soldiers killed as they wished in the countryside. Roomer recognized that power lay in the hands of violent men and that they murdered with impunity. The wealthy sanctioned the violence that maintained them. He knew the government was doing nothing to stop the slaughter or address grievances. So Bishop Roomer said, "Soldiers, do not obey your superiors when they order you to kill. You are killing your brothers and sisters. In the name of God, in the name of these suffering people whose laments rise to heaven, each day more tumultuous, I beg of you, I ask of you, *I order you*, in the name of God, stop the repression!" Like Christ, his action and words led to his death. But he went on to say, *'I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people.'*

When Jesus cleansed the temple it was as if he were saying, stop playing religious games that destroy my people. In the name of God, in the name of my suffering people, I beg of you, I ask of you, I order you, in the name of God, stop the religious repression."

The cleansing of the temple is not about selling gift certificates in the narthex or *Jesus Saves* air freshness. Jesus came into the temple not to be destructive or disruptive but to draw us back to the heart of God. In Jesus, God came to dwell with us, *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" Jesus, God's eternal Word, came to draw us back to the heart of God, to break through all that separates us from God and from one another. Jesus came to the temple to overturn every barrier that separates us from God. This story is not about selling gift certificates in the narthex. It is Jesus' angry, loving disruption drawing us back to the heart of God.

Gracious God, by water and the Spirit you claimed us as your own, cleansing us from sin, and giving us new life. You made us members of your body, the church, calling us to be your servants in the world. Continue the good work you have begun in us. Send us forth in the power of your Spirit to love and serve you with joy, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen