

Cleaning House

John 2:13-22

Also Hosea 2:14-16; Psalm 45:1-17; 1 John 4:7-12

Cleaning House

Ruth and I have been cleaning house – her mother’s house. It is a filthy job. The basement is the worst, with all the dust and old mortar and animal droppings. Ruth’s brother swept up 60 pounds of dirt in the basement! Now don’t get the wrong impression. Ruth’s mother was a very good housekeeper. But she had to go into a nursing home in the fall and the house has been vacant since then. But even the cleanest of houses accumulates dirt – under the furniture, behind the wall hangings, in the far reaches of the cabinets – and in the basement. When *you* move out of your own house, you will find dirt you didn’t know existed.

If there was ever a clean building in the ancient world, it was the temple in Jerusalem. Among the detailed instructions for worship were directions for cleaning the equipment. I am sure the Levites took great pride in serving in God’s house and maintained high standards of cleanliness. Most Bibles title this morning’s gospel passage “Cleansing the Temple,” which is curious since the word “cleansing” is not used in the text. Of course the animals would have created some dirt. A lot, no doubt. But Jesus did not target only the animals. He also drove out the money-changers. Jesus’ charge against them was, “Do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” Now Jesus was certainly not against trade. The disciples He picked were businessmen, and Jesus was a businessman carpenter Himself for 15 years. And money-changing does not create dirt! The dirt in the temple was not the physical kind, and Jesus’ housecleaning was about something deeper than animals and money.

God’s House

Jesus was not anti-business, and He did not hate animals. The problem was not the money or the animals – the problem was money and animals in the wrong place. I grew up on a farm, where we had all sorts of animals. But we never had animals in the house, and when one of the dogs ran into the house out of fear during a thunderstorm, he was unceremoniously thrown out. Money-changers belong in banks, and animals belong in barns. Houses are for people. God’s house was for people, but especially for people who came to worship. A temple is for joyous and reverent and humble worship – which is hard to do with animals pooping and money-changers braying. Godly Jews who came to Jerusalem to worship in the temple would have been distressed at the commotion inside. They came expecting levitical choirs singing praises to God and what they found was the racket of the marketplace.

Jesus came to clean house, and the temple needed a thorough house-cleaning. But so did the house of Israel, and that is why the temple was so dirty. There were godly Jews in Jesus’ day – Mary and Joseph, John the Baptist and the disciples, and a lot of others. There were many Jews who were zealous about keeping the law of Moses, so let us not cast all the Jews in a bad light. But the reason the temple needed to be cleansed was that *people* had made it dirty. People had brought money exchanges and animals into the temple. If there was going to be permanent solution to the temple, Jesus was going to have to deal with the dirt that was in the people of Israel.

The temple in Jerusalem was God’s house, and so was the nation of Israel on a different scale. And Jesus Himself was the temple. Or more precisely, Jesus’ body was the temple, because God lived in it. Jesus made this point in verse 19 and the Jews completely missed it. Of course they were not thinking that Jesus was God, so they had no idea that God inhabited the body before them. We tend to forget the significance of God’s dwelling. We believe God is present everywhere – and He is. Isaiah put it eloquently, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?’” (Isaiah 66:1) God made all things, and no place can contain God. Yet it is also true that God is present in a special way in certain locations. God visited Adam in the garden and

ate with Abraham by his tent. He appeared to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai. God's glory cloud filled the temple in Jerusalem when Solomon dedicated it. God is omnipresent, but can anyone doubt that God's presence took on a completely new significance when Jesus walked Palestine? Jesus's body is God's temple and God was present in an amazing new way when Jesus came.

And now the church is God's temple. This is why Pentecost, which we will celebrate in a couple of months, is so significant. Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins, but at Pentecost God entered and filled the church. When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, we read in 2 Chronicles, "fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. (2 Chronicles 7:1) So ten days after Jesus ascended to the Father, He came into the church – and the sign was the fire and wind that filled the room where the disciples were praying. Long before that, the people of Israel had not been faithful to God, so God left His house and sent the Babylonians to destroy it. When the Jews returned to Palestine, they rebuilt the temple – but it was not nearly as glorious as the original. The prophet Haggai addressed this concern, and assured the people that although the building was not as impressive, God was nevertheless present. The church also is often unimpressive. We are distressed to see bad teaching, division, laziness, and worse sins in the church – and the early church was positively frightening. Just read 1 and 2 Corinthians! Nevertheless the church is God's temple, and God lives among us. We know this because the Holy Spirit filled the church at Pentecost, but also because we are joined to Jesus. Jesus's body is the temple of God. Baptism joins us to Jesus, so just as Jesus physical body is the temple of God, so His body the church is the temple of God.

The temple was God's house. God is everywhere and no building can contain Him, but in some mysterious way God is specially present in the temple. God's first temple was a tent in the wilderness while the people of Israel were traveling from Egypt to Canaan. Then Solomon built a magnificent building to serve as God's temple. The body that formed in Mary's womb was God's temple as Jesus walked the earth. And now the church is God's temple. These are all different forms of God's house, and these are the places where God is present in a *special* way.

Cleaning God's House

Today's gospel passage really happened. It is not an inspiring story, or a moral lesson, but a real historical event. And I am sure godly Jews were much comforted and blessed to worship again in a decent environment when Jesus cleared the merchants out of the temple. Jesus came to save His people, and He brought real blessings during the time He walked the earth. But as Jesus pointed out, this cleansing was a sign of a greater cleansing yet to come. Just as Solomon's temple was destroyed because of sin, so Jesus' body was destroyed because of sin. The Babylonians thoroughly burned the original temple, and Jesus' body was destroyed beyond recognition by the whips and the cross of the Roman executioners. But while Solomon's temple was replaced by an inferior model, Jesus' body was replaced by a much more glorious one. Jesus was guilty of no sin, yet He bore in His body the guilt of all our sin. And when that body died, the penalty for our sin was paid, the guilt of our sin was erased, and the power of sin was broken forever. Three days later Jesus rose from the grave with a new, glorious body. Now that's a housecleaning! Although Jesus was sinless, His first body was a body of flesh and was subject to all the filth of life in the flesh. His new body is a body of the Spirit, and is pure and incorruptible and eternal.

Now we who are baptized have been joined to Jesus. We share in the pure and eternal life of Jesus. While we are in these bodies of flesh, sin still tempts us and tries to draw us away from the Father. But we can no more be separated from God than Jesus can be separated from His body. The wonderful good news is that God has cleansed us and we are holy! This is why Paul routinely addresses the Christians in his letters as "saints," holy ones. Even the Corinthians! We are not holy because of our excellent lives, but because we are attached to the One who is holy. Jesus's holiness is so powerful, it smothers our sin and sweeps us

along in righteousness. And just as Jesus *has* cleansed us by attaching us to Himself, so He is *constantly* cleansing us throughout this life until all sin is removed. In the end Jesus will accomplish this by replacing our bodies of flesh which are inhabited by sin with new spiritual bodies in which there is no sin. When all the elect have been saved and resurrected in spiritual bodies, the cleansing of the temple will be complete. God will live forever in His people in perfect harmony and the covenant promise will be fulfilled.

Temple Cleaning Today

Did you ever wonder why John included this event in his gospel? I am sure that many of you are wondering how Jesus' temple-cleaning 2,000 years ago helps us with the problems we face in the 21st century. On one level this story shows us the intense personal connection between Jesus and God. Jesus loves His Father and is consumed with righteous jealousy for His Father's glory. Imagine the impact of this incident! It was outrageous that money-changers and animals were in the temple, but this had been happening for a good while and people were somewhat used to it. Then here comes Jesus – the teacher who has been calmly talking with people by the seaside and in villages – with a whip! He drives out the merchants and destroys their goods. Sounds like Indiana Jones, doesn't it? Or the work of a madman! What ever possessed Jesus to act with such violence? Was this a moment of temporary insanity in an otherwise wise person? What drove Jesus to this was love for His Father. Deep, intense love drove Jesus to do what others would consider insane.

So how does this inter-Trinitarian lovefest help us? Later in his gospel John records Jesus saying, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." (John 15:9) The jealous love we see here between the Father and Son is not some sticky, private Hallmark sentiment, but an engulfing affection that spills out into the cosmos and overwhelms God's people. The temple-cleaning was love in action, and Jesus acts in that same love toward you. Jesus enraged the temple authorities, but that time He escaped with His life. Eventually the patience of the Jews would wear out, but Jesus' love never wears out. Solomon said, "...love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD." (Song of Solomon 8:6) In this event we see the fierce love of the Lord in action. Jesus would rather die than stop loving His Father – and Jesus would rather die than stop loving you.

From another angle this story shows us the commitment of Jesus to those who worship God. Jesus was willing to do something bizarre and dangerous so that God's people could worship as they longed to do. This encourages us when we are distressed at the corrupt worship we see around us. The money-changers and animal merchants were able to operate in the temple for a time, but Jesus eventually drove them out. So in our day false pastors are able to operate for a time, but their day is coming in which Jesus will drive them from their pulpits. We ought not to grow complacent or accepting of false pastors, but we need not wear ourselves out with anxiety about them. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. Jesus sees what is happening. Jesus cleansed the temple 2,000 years ago, and Jesus will cleanse the church today.

Verse 19 is the explosive center of this passage. Everything hinges on Jesus. The temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish people, the church today all take their meaning from Jesus. What happened to Jesus determines everything that happens to us and to the whole world. Jesus prophesied that He would be destroyed and resurrected. That change in Jesus is going to change the temple, the Jews, and the world.

What is vastly more important than improving the worship of God's people is recreating those people. The Jews who entered the newly cleaned temple were still guilty people worn down by sin. Those of us who sincerely love God and come today in spirit and in truth are guilty sinners. The cleanest temple did not make the Jews righteous, and the purest church will not make us holy. So that temple in Jerusalem did not stay clean for very long. It became even more and more polluted until finally Jesus returned from heaven and burned the place down in 70A.D. And why has the church seen reform movements in every

generation? Because sinful men keep polluting the church in every generation. Jesus provided some welcome relief to the godly Jews who wished to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, but no amount of temple-cleaning will make the worshipers clean. The only way to get clean worshipers was to destroy the sin which keeps polluting them.

We have an old house, and the basement is very dirty. I installed fresh, clean tread covers on the stairs, but the dirt just coats the tread covers and still finds its way into the house. So I put blankets on the floor in front of the stairs, but dirt evades the blankets and the tread covers. I scrubbed the floor in front of the laundry area and put carpet there, but do you know what happened last week? Ruth announced that I am still tracking dirt up from the basement. There is only one solution. If I am to stop bringing basement dirt up to the house, I am going to have to replace the walls, floors, and ceiling with clean materials. I am working on it!

The only way to keep the temple clean is to replace the dirty sinners who enter with clean saints. Jesus took the sin of the world upon Himself, and when He died, sin died with Him. Jesus rose a new man – a man who no longer carried the guilt of sin. A man who was no longer susceptible to the temptations of this world. Jesus rose a heavenly man with a spiritual body – a sinless, indestructible, pure, eternal body. A man who could enter God’s presence without fear – with complete confidence, with joy and peace. Everyone who is joined to Jesus by baptism will receive such a body. For now we are still using the original bodies God gave us at birth. Sin is still at work in these bodies, and sin struggles against the Spirit as long as we are on earth. But when these bodies die, sin dies completely and the struggle is over. But being joined to Jesus, although sin is still at work in us, it has no power over us. When Jesus died, He broke the power of sin, and it can no longer control us. Those who are baptized are living in the new temple of Jesus where sin has no power and all is holy. And joined to Jesus, we are welcome here without fear. Jesus is our home! We come to Jesus with complete confidence, with rejoicing and in peace.

Because we are joined to the resurrected Christ, the defining reality about us is that we are clean. The Apostle Paul addressed dozens of problems and sins – and some were awful – in the first century church, but he never addressed the church members as sinners. Paul addressed them as saints, holy ones. Paul was not oblivious to their sins – he discussed them at length – nor did he excuse them. But the powerful reality of Jesus is far more significant than the residual sin in us. Sin is troublesome, and in its worst forms is deadly – but only on earth. In light of eternity, sin is a passing problem. The almighty Christ has defeated sin and is destroying it everywhere. There will come a day when sin is far in the past. The eternal truth is that we are holy because we are in Jesus, and His resurrection in a heavenly body makes that possible.

Cleaning Us

One conclusion from this is that we ought to practice thinking more about Jesus than about our sin. Of course we must confess our sin and strive to conquer it. But that is more easily accomplished by dwelling on the holiness of Jesus than the ugliness of ourselves. Jesus is glorious in holiness, and we partake of His holiness. We truly *are* saints! We ought to celebrate our holiness everyday. And as we do, sin fades away and holiness increases in our lives.

A corollary to this is that we will have healthier relationships to the extent we see other Christians as saints rather than sinners. Other people annoy or even hurt you. To deny that is foolish and perverse. But to dwell on it is destructive. God is at work in all those who are joined to Jesus, even the bad ones – you know, the Christians who swear or cheat or are lazy or drunk – even those who are hateful now. God is purging out their sin. “Oh yeah,” you say. “I don’t see it. Mary is as hateful now as she was ten years ago.” So you do not see it. What of it? Do you suppose that you see everything? Or that you *ought* to see everything? God works in each of us according to His own purposes and in His own time. What God is doing in

someone else is none of your business. Jesus loves all His people, and He will not abandon anyone to sin forever. It is foolish to ignore the sins of others, but it is destructive to dwell on them. Paul instructs us that “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7) And as we do, holiness grows in us and in others.

While it is wonderful that we have a position of holiness, acts of sin are still a problem for us. But Jesus is dealing with those, and the way He deals with acts of sin is by staying close to us. You don’t sin less, at least not permanently, by acts of discipline. It is good, very good, to eat and exercise and work and speak in a godly manner – and to possess the discipline to do so. But that does not deal with sin in us. Sin is killed only by Jesus, and Jesus is closely present in prayer, scripture, and the sacraments. By these means of grace Jesus draws us closer to Himself where sin is less tempting. This is how Jesus continues to clean the temple until the end of time. This is why weekly worship is so important. It is here, on the Lord’s Day, the Day of Jesus, that we meet with Jesus. We hear His voice, we share our needs, and we eat His food. Whether the sexton did a good job cleaning our building is not that important. What is terrifically important is that Jesus is here cleansing you.

Jesus also cleans us during the rest of the week as we read the scripture and pray. Many of us value the Bible only to the degree that it makes us feel better – comforted or wiser. But Jesus is present in His word, even when we do not feel it. Now of course it is better when we gain a clear understanding of scripture, but even when we struggle to know what a passage means, Jesus is using it to cleanse us of sin and make us more holy. And some Christians give you the impression that unless you are emotionally worked up or speak in eloquent language your prayers are not worth much. This is awful! Do you think that God refuses to hear you when you are tired or confused or tempted by sin? Of course not! Those are the times you have greatest need to pray, and God will be very attentive to your plight. Even when you do not feel like praying, or that your prayers are going nowhere. Do you think that the God who inhabits the universe is unable to hear your prayers because you are weak and hurting? All week long Jesus is cleansing us by scripture and prayer. You may not feel any more holy now than you did last Sunday, but that just proves that your feelings are unreliable.

Brothers and sisters, you are a clean temple. Jesus has cleansed you by His blood. Just as surely as He cleansed the temple 2,000 years ago, Jesus has purged your guilt, set you free from the control of sin, and declared you holy. Jesus is delighted to be with you today, and offers Himself to you in this bread and wine. Rejoice! Come in peace. For the war is over and the feasting has begun.

Prayer

Great God, we praise you that you looked upon us miserable sinners and came among us to teach and heal and comfort. We worship you for loving us more than death. We praise you for cleansing our guilt and breaking the power of sin by your crucifixion. We adore you for taking us as your own bride. Holy Father, we are ashamed to confess how quickly we forget these things. We become preoccupied with the cares of this world and believe the lies of sin which lead us astray. Forgive us we pray, for the sake of Jesus whom you love. Fulfill your resurrection promise in us, that we might be in fact as holy as you declare us to be. This we ask in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus our Savior. Amen.

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