**The Third Sunday in Lent**

**Sunday March 7, 2021**

**“Cleansing the Temple” (John 2:13-22)**

The lectionary reading for this third Sunday in Lent is a bit of a surprise. Usually this passage is preached on Palm Sunday since the other Gospel writers place this story within the context of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Holy Week. Yet John, the maverick gospel, places the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, which raises some historical questions for us. While such questions are important, I don’t want to dwell on them this morning. I think it’s a more fruitful approach to discover the message of the passage and it’s challenge for our lives. For now we can say that John had a particular reason for placing the story of the Temple cleansing in this place within the Gospel narrative.

When we read this passage, we can’t help but be a bit taken aback with its portrayal of Jesus’ anger. We’re accustomed to a meek and mild Jesus who responds to people with love. The image of Jesus with a whip in his hand chasing the merchants and the animals out of the Temple and overturning the moneychangers’ tables is a bit of shock to us (John 2:15). But when we read through the Gospels and observe Jesus’ interactions with various people we gain a better perspective on this. A close reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus did not have a set response to people; he interacted with people on a personal level, treating each person as an individual. At the same time, certain patterns emerge. In general, Jesus reached out to those on the margins with compassion, but he was critical of the religious establishment. The people on the margins knew that they were far away from God, so Jesus loved them, offered them forgiveness, and encouraged them to turn to God. The religious people that Jesus encountered were so sure of their piety that they couldn’t see their faults. Often times, they were self-righteous and judgmental towards those on the margins. Jesus loved these folks too, but he powerfully confronted the flaws in their devotion to God, desiring to move them to a truer worship of God. This scene in the Temple fits within Jesus’ critique of failings of the religious practices of his day.

This leads to an important issue concerning this passage. We can readily observe Jesus’ anger at the wrongdoings within the Temple, but reason for his indignation is not completely spelled out. People came to the Temple to offer sacrifices to God, so the sale of cattle, sheep, and doves was essential. So, why did Jesus take offense at this? Did Jesus view the presence of animals in the Temple courts as a desecration of the holy place? Or did he see animal sacrifice as something that needed to be stopped completely? His reaction to the moneychangers is also perplexing. People were required to pay a Temple tax for its upkeep, but they couldn’t offer Roman or Greek coins, since these had pagan images on them that were prohibited by Judaism. Moneychangers would exchange profane coins for ones acceptable for offerings to the Temple. Some have suggested that these moneychangers took advantage of people by charging unfair rates of exchange in order to maximize their profits. Was this the reason for Jesus’ anger at the moneychangers?

Perhaps Jesus was merely enraged that this holy place had become a common marketplace. His reprimand of dove sellers seems to suggest this - “*Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!*” (John 2:16). If this was the case, what are the implications of this passage for our modern context? Some suggest that this passage is a prohibition against the buying and selling of goods within the church, the turning of sacred space into a marketplace. But this presents a number of questions for me. Can we buy and sell in the lower hall since it’s outside of the sanctuary? Can we buy and sell as long as it’s not on a Sunday? Can we buy and sell if it’s for a good cause, such as raising money for missions? Now I’m not suggesting that we should disregard this application of the passage and conduct commerce in our church every Sunday morning. Maybe it’s a good thing that church is the one place where we can go and not be focused on making money or acquiring stuff. Maybe it’s important for our spiritual health when the business of the world gets left on the doorstep when we enter into church.

Yet perhaps the turning of church into a marketplace is more subtle and profound that simply the buying and selling of goods. In today’s world the business model is considered to be the most efficient one for organizations and almost anything can become a commodity. The Christian church is not immune from commercialization. A business approach and a consumer mentality can all too easily creep in.

Eugene Peterson wrote this passionate censure of American pastors in 1987 and his words are still relevant. He writes, “*The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a* *company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper’s concerns – how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from the competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money. Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations. Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping, to be sure, but shopkeeping all the same*” (*Working the Angles,* p. 1)

I don’t want to become a religious shopkeeper, but I must admit that it is a great temptation to operate in this way. As the church in Canada struggles with declining numbers, we can become preoccupied with simply getting customers in the door, delivering the goods in a nice, neat package, and keeping the customers happy, lest we lose them to the religious shop down the street. But when the church becomes a religious store the goal of coming to church is reduced to receiving some religious goods that will improve your life and help you to get through the week. And if a person’s needs are not being met, there is always the other shop around the corner. But the gospel is not about getting something; it’s about giving something up. The church is not a marketplace and we are not in the business of peddling cheap grace to the masses. We are contemplating heavy matters - God, the soul, and Scripture.

Later on in that same chapter, Peterson writes these words, “The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. *The pastor’s responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God*” (*Working the Angles,* p. 2).

Being attentive to God is being awake and aware of God’s presence in our lives. It involves prayer, which is communication with God, pausing long enough to listen and talk to him. It also includes contemplating Scripture, carefully listening for God’s voice. Finally, it necessitates paying attention to the matters of our soul by being mindful of what God is doing in our lives. *So, what is God doing in our lives and in our church today?* The story of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple invites us to consider what kinds of divine housecleaning need to take place in our midst.

If Jesus entered our church, like he did in the Temple so long ago, what things would he chase out? What tables would he overturn? What words would he speak to us? Lent calls us to examine our lives, as individuals and as a church, and discern what needs to be cleansed. And even though this soul-searching process may be challenging, remember that God is with us and he will never give up on us. Jesus didn’t give up on the lukewarm church in Laodicea, instead he said, “*Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.* *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me*” (Revelation 3:19-20).

Many years ago Christian singer Keith Green wrote these lyrics, “*Rushing wind blow through this Temple, blowing out the dust within*.” May the Holy Spirit do some much needed spring cleaning in our lives and in our church. May the wind of the Spirit blow away all the dust and the cobwebs that have accumulated over time. May we earnestly pray with psalmist, “*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wickedway in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*” (Psalm 139:23-24).