

CLEANING HOUSE

A SERMON FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
MARCH 8, 2015

First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida
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JOHN 2:13-22

I suppose I could have entitled this sermon “Spring Cleaning” just as easily as “Cleaning House.”

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell the story of the cleansing of the temple, of Jesus driving the money-changers and the sellers of animals for sacrifice out of the temple. But where the Synoptic gospels all cast the story in the last week of the life of Christ, John puts it early in His ministry, right after Jesus has performed the miracle of the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee.

There is no reason to believe that John got it wrong, and that the other three are right, or vice versa. The act that Jesus performed may well have happened twice.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke appear to condense the ministry of Jesus into one year. John’s narrative appears to cover three.

I’ve thought a lot about the process by which the gospels were written.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not have word processors, computers. They didn’t have typewriters. Nor did they have tape recorders or video cameras.

The process of writing the gospel was labor intensive. A pen and ink well, not even a ball point. A sheet of papyrus, or maybe a scroll of parchment. No reams of paper.

John was old, maybe even in his nineties when he wrote his gospel. He probably didn’t write it. He probably dictated it to a scribe, a younger man, with a steadier hand and better eyesight, who wrote as fast as his hand could move as the old Apostle/Evangelist/Revelator/Divine told his stories.

Did John start out to tell the whole story? He certainly didn’t start out like any of the others. He spoke in theological words and concepts far beyond the other three evangelists, gospel writers, when he began.

If he got a story or two out of place, if he had a thought and uttered it before it fled from his mind, if the scribe got one of those sheets of papyrus in the wrong order in the stack of stories, it is a forgivable and understandable error.

Or it may well be that Jesus cleaned house twice.

Years ago, at a conference in Charleston, West, Virginia, I got into an argument with the speaker, a noted theologian named Ruell Howe. Dr. Howe stated that Jesus never got angry. I begged to differ with him. I thought that our text last week, in which Jesus told Peter “get thee behind me, Satan, and this week’s lesson were ample proof that Jesus could and did show anger.

I still believe that. Jesus was angered by what was taking place in and around the temple, the place where the Lord God of Israel was to be worshipped.

Now those sheep and oxen, and probably some turtle doves, were not being stabled in the temple. Nor were they there for the weekly small animal livestock auction. As Israel had developed from an agrarian society into a commercial society, into a nation of craftsmen and tradesmen and merchants, fewer people could go out into their own flock, herd, or dovecote and find the animals required for the ritual sacrifices in the temple.

Micah and Malachi as well as Isaiah had pointed out that God did not want the sacrifices and burnt offerings that His chosen people were offering up. Micah even answered the question “What does the Lord require of you?” He told them, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

But they continued to offer lambs and yearling calves and three year-old heifers, and turtle doves upon the altar at the temple, and the sale of those animals was a lucrative sideline around the temple.

The changing of money was another. The “coin of the realm” in the day of Jesus was the Roman denarius, which had a portrait of Caesar upon it. That denarius defied the commandment about graven images. More than that, if the Romans worshipped their emperor, and bowing down before him was indeed perceived as worship, then no Jew could pay his tithes and offerings with a coin that had Caesar’s likeness stamped upon it. So the “new money” was changed for the “old money”. Denarius for shekel. With a percentage charged for the exchange, of course. And then, at the end of the day, the Levites from the temple brought the “old money” back outside, and exchanged it for new. Hypocritical? Perhaps. Profitable? For sure!

And Jesus was angered by what He saw, by what they were doing, and taking some cords, perhaps lead-ropes or ties for the sheep and cattle, He made a whip, like the whip that would be used on Him on another occasion, and he drove them out of the temple, turning over their tables, pouring out their coins, but dealing less harshly with the sellers of the doves, simply telling them to take their wares away.

On the day when Jesus' parents brought Him to the temple to be dedicated, they brought with them two turtle doves, to be offered as a sacrifice. That was perhaps the first sacrifice made for Jesus.

You know, we talk about sacrificial offerings, about giving until it hurts. We use the word tithe interchangeably with the word offering, and we shouldn't. A tithe is a true tenth. Malachi and Micah indict the Israelites for short-changing God on their tithes and offerings. Malachi even accuses them of robbing God (3:8-9)

We Christians know that God does not require us to sacrifice sheep and cattle and turtle doves upon the altar. But we sometimes forget that God expects tithes, offerings, a sacrifice of another kind, not as an appeasement to a deity who is angered, but as a sign of gratitude to a God who is gracious, who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

No sacrifice we could ever make could make things even for the sacrifice that God made for us. No sacrifice we could ever imagine would be as great as the sacrifice of God's only son upon the cross for our sins. No offering we could ever bring would ever match that.

So the tithes, the ten per cent that faithful givers give, and the offerings, the "over and above" the tithe for some, the "in place of the tithe" for others, we bring are not tribute, not offered to appease or placate a God who is angered, but a sign of thanksgiving for the blessings we have already received from a loving God, who has provided for us beyond our imagination or our expectation.

We also can be glad that we don't have to change our coins, our bills, which have graven images of our Presidents upon them, for currency lacking any such idolatrous engravings. We haven't reached the point where one can swipe a credit card in the pew in order to make an offering, but we do have people who electronically transfer funds from their bank account into the church account. Or who have their pledge to the church automatically withdrawn.

I suppose we could pass a rule that you can't put anything in the plate that has a President on it. That would mean that you could put a Ben Franklin in the plate, because he was never president! But then neither was Alexander Hamilton!

But if we passed such rules, Jesus would be just as angered with us as He was with those at the temple. It isn't about laws, and rules. It is about grace and gratitude.

The story of the cleansing of the temple in John's gospel introduces a chapter in which the contrast between Jesus and official Judaism with all its rules and laws is portrayed. The framework for that dialogue is the visit of Nicodemus. We'll get into that chapter next week, but for now, Jesus sets the stage for what is to come by telling those who challenge Him at the temple that "if this temple were

destroyed, it will be raised up in three days.” They thought He was talking about the building. Instead, He was talking about His body. They thought He was threatening to tear down the temple. Instead, He was answering their threats against His life.

In the other three gospels, Jesus’ cleansing of the temple is the final act that causes the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees to decide that Jesus must be killed. John tells the story early, to set the stage, to explain why all that followed had to happen, so that God’s plan for our salvation could be acted out upon the stage of history.

Jesus Christ came into the world not to clean house, but to die upon the cross for our sins. Jesus Christ came not to turn over the tables of the money changers, but to turn the tables on sin and death. Jesus came not to destroy, but to raise up. And in raising up is our hope and our salvation.

Let us pray.

O Lord, if we, by our failure to worship, by our failure to serve, by our failure to be grateful for our many gifts, have angered you, we are heartily sorry for our sins. But we know that you are a Lord of grace and forgiveness, of mercy and love.

Receive our gratitude, our gifts, our lives dedicated to raising up your word, to lifting up your cross, to looking for our salvation, through you, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.