

“Cleaning House”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent III – March 11, 2012

John 2: 12-23

Last Sunday was a great day – lots of memories shared, great to see so many people, wonderful meal following worship. It was a great day as we celebrated our fiftieth anniversary, to be sure.

For us in Indianapolis, that all came crashing down on Wednesday. I doubt that any of us ever thought we would see what happened at noon on Wednesday just north of here on West 56th Street. The man who made the Indianapolis Colts relevant, who set records left and right, who brought this city a championship in 2007 – the man who was the face of the franchise – was in front of the cameras saying goodbye.

Two years ago, I never thought I would one day say, “Peyton Manning, former quarterback of the Colts.” But that is the reality in which we live in 2012. A great deal has happened in a short amount of time. And yet we are all in a state of shock at the departure of a living legend. Then, two days later, the house cleaning apparently was not done, as several more veteran players were released from the team. I have a feeling when we’re watching a game next year, we’re all going to need a player roster in front of us, so we know who’s playing for the home team!

Cleaning house: it’s a phrase we use when major changes occur in an organization, such as what’s happened for the Colts. It’s also a phrase which has a very literal meaning. For some of us, cleaning is a chore. It is very difficult to get motivated to sort through all of our belongings. It can be hard to throw things away, as we remember with longing the memories a belonging can bring. In many ways, when we face the task of cleaning house, we are facing the challenge of breaking with some of our past and preparing for what lies ahead in our future. Because when we start throwing out items, we are breaking away from the physical reminders of our past, and trusting that our memories will keep alive for us what is important.

On the surface, it seems natural to draw a parallel between cleaning house and Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. In this story from John, we witness Jesus throwing out the merchants and traders who were “doing business” in the temple at Jerusalem. He makes a whip of cords and drives the animals out, and pours the coins of the merchants onto the floor. Initially, it appears that Jesus is getting all the riff-raff out of what is to be a place of worship, as he says: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (2:16).

Yet there is something deeper to these actions of Jesus than just cleaning house. In fact, it reflects a clashing of the old with the new, and how eventually, that clash will result in his own death on the cross.

As one commentator has said, “The problem, on the surface of things, that Jesus encounters in the temple . . . is not simply commerce, the business of buying and selling. In fact, the problem is less with the buyers as it is with the sellers . . . The problem is the sense of business as usual in the temple of God – the selling of sacrifices and paying temple taxes, etc. All of these things leave the temple a symbol of the old and passing era, within the realm of the ordinary (and old) economy of the ‘marketplace’ – you get what you pay for” (Michael Hoy, “Exchanging the Old Temple for the New Temple,” www.crossings.org/theology/theolo213).

In other words, Jesus challenges what have been the traditional patterns of behavior – selling, buying, and trading in the temple. In his actions, Jesus challenges what the people had been accustomed to, and illustrates what the new kingdom will be and will require. And with this clash, the people did not know what to do. In fact, this much is said in the crowd’s reaction to him: “What sign can you show us for doing this?” “It is a clear sign then-and-there, the people did not know what Jesus was up to, and were no doubt offended by his action. When the kingdom of the new comes into conflict with our own business as usual, however, neither do we find it any less scandalous” (ibid).

There are times when a mess can be so serious, nothing but radical housecleaning will correct the situation.

That’s what today’s gospel lesson is all about. Jesus finds a horrible mess in the temple and becomes very angry. He actually took a whip and drove the merchants out of the temple courtyard where they were conducting business. He overturned the tables where the accountants were making change and he told the merchants to take their merchandise away.

It is important to realize that there are different kinds of messes that require different methods of housecleaning. There are physical messes, emotional messes and spiritual messes. All of them have a few principles in common.

- *Messes build up slowly over time. We don’t notice a bit of dust here, a pile of papers there until gradually we are oblivious to the mess that is quite evident to others.*
- *The longer we live with a mess, the easier it becomes to live with it.*
- *The longer we live with a mess, the more difficult it is to do the housecleaning.*
- *If we do not clean up our messes, they will finally destroy us in much the same way that the temple system ended up destroying the worship and reverence of God (www.lectionarysermons.com/mar26_00.html).*

One aspect of Lent is to look openly at those parts of our life where we have accepted “business as usual,” and discern when we have rebelled against anything which challenges that. As individuals, we can become content and comfortable with our daily patterns of life. We are comfortable with people who look like us, think like us, do things the same way we do. And we can react harshly to those who challenge our comfort levels.

The same can be said of the church. We become accustomed to worshipping the same way, to conducting business the same way, to serving the same people we have always served. Yet many times, what God is calling us to do is throw out our old patterns of behavior, and seek out what Jesus calls us to do in a new and transforming way.

Brian Stoffregen asks the following questions: “What would Jesus find in our churches? Although he probably wouldn’t find cattle or sheep . . . would he find the same attitude – religious rituals being just a business? Is the church building simply a place where people and God take care of business? Can worship become centered on the things we do, rather than (centered on) the God who is present giving to us and forgiving us in Word and Sacrament?” (www.crossmarks.com/brian/john2x13).

As Jesus throws out the cattle and sheep from the temple, what needs to be thrown out of our spiritual lives to focus us back on God? As Jesus overturns the tables of the merchants, what attitudes of ours need to be overturned to help us hear fully the gospel of Jesus Christ? As Jesus proclaims that the temple of his body will be raised up, how much are we willing to trust in this central element of our faith? Jesus calls on us to do more than some simple house cleaning; he calls on us to trust and believe in the new, and to not allow our comfort in “business as usual” to guide our lives.

May God speak to us in new and exciting ways, as we await the life-transforming new of Easter Sunday. Thanks be to God. Amen.