

“Cleaning Out”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent III – March 8, 2015

John 2: 12-23

How many of you enjoy cleaning things out? If you're like me, it's not first on your list of favorite things to do. Usually I either have to get in a specific mood to clean, or there is a precipitating event that forces me to clean things out. That happened a month ago when Debbie and I got a new bed for our bedroom. In order to make space for the new bed, we had to clean things out, especially under the bed. Let's just say that the room feels a lot bigger now that it's been cleaned out!

In our modern, technological world, one of the areas I am constantly cleaning out is my email. When I am off for a sabbath day during the week, I don't check my email until I come in the office on Thursday morning. When I do, I usually have between 25-40 messages waiting for me, about a third of which are “junk” email. If I don't keep up with deleting messages in my inbox, I can very quickly have 300-400 messages stacked up in no time. And when I looked this morning, I had a total of deleted messages, dating back to one year ago. While this can seem overwhelming, to be sure, I've noticed one thing in this constant practice of cleaning out. When I'm finished getting rid of unnecessary messages, and these folders are relatively clean, I feel a weight has been lifted and I'm not burdened with all that had been there previously.

Cleaning out. 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 out, 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 out 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).

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 I shared in this month’s newsletter, the Session has set as its overarching goal this year, “To Grow Christ’s Church at John Knox Presbyterian Church.” “To grow Christ’s Church” can involve many things and be measured in a variety of ways. But the phrase “to grow”

implies newness and a change from what once was. Not just bigger, but different and new and vibrant. When something grows, it is no longer the shape and form it used to be, even though it is grounded in what it once was. That is what we are seeking God to do at John Knox: to grow in our discipleship as an Open. Caring. Community.

Do you wish to see the same happen for this church? Are you willing to be an active participant and contributor towards this important goal? What needs to be cleaned out of our life as a church so that we can grow Christ's Church in this place? Is there "business as usual" which needs to be thrown out so that we can grow into that new thing God has in store for us? Do we as individuals need to clean out some long-standing, comfortable beliefs that are preventing us from joyfully and enthusiastically embracing what God is doing in us, for us, and through us by the transforming work of Jesus Christ?

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 cleaning out of clutter; 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.