

“Cleaning House”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent III – March 7, 2021

John 2: 12-23

Everyone remember what the weather was like three weeks ago? We had nearly a foot of snow on the ground, and the temperatures did not get above freezing over the course of two weeks. Now, less than a month later, the only evidence of that winter weather are the diminishing snow piles in parking lots at stores. All of the accumulated snow has melted here at the church. It’s just another reminder of how quickly things can change – both with the weather and in life.

As the weather has warmed up this last week, I found myself drawn to cleaning at our house. Whereas two weeks earlier I was using my snow shovel to clear several inches of snow out of my driveway, on Wednesday I was using my leaf blower to clean out my garage and driveway of all the winter dirt and grime. I opened up the windows and doors of the house and let it air out for the first time in months. And I started going through stuff and throwing things away that we no longer needed to keep. If you’re like me, there’s something innate about the change in weather from winter to spring and the impulse to start cleaning. It’s no wonder they call it spring cleaning!

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 we are 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 he 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/theology213).

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).

A key 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.

In a conversation with Jeff Gillespie this week, this was brought to an even more vivid light from the events of the past year. Jeff was sharing that while it’s been jarring and difficult for us to be forced out of our normal routines for worship due to the pandemic, perhaps that isn’t such a bad thing. We’ve learned that we can connect with more people through technology and live-streaming than we could before. We’ve learned to be flexible and adaptable in how we worship, yes, grieving what we cannot do, but also giving thanks for what we are able to do. In many ways, we in the church have been forced to look at ourselves in the mirror and decide how God is calling us to new patterns of behavior,

because we were not given another choice due to keeping one another safe from Covid-19.

In her book “Lent in Plain Sight,” Jill Duffield uses ten objects from ordinary life to walk through Lent in a series of devotionals. For the week when she focuses on coins, she shares the following reflection on Jesus cleansing the temple.

The expressions on Jesus’ face in the images depicting this biblical account arrest me. I confess I do not like seeing Jesus angry, wielding a whip, chasing people and animals. I prefer the kinder, gentler version of Jesus, the pictures of Jesus with a lamb wrapped around his neck, the 1950’s Sunday school curriculum Jesus with children on his lap and seated around his feet. The drawings of Jesus, red-faced and grimacing, vendors cowering in fear, birds’ wings flapping, feathers flying, sheep and cattle scattering in terror, they trouble me. Which, I suppose, they should.

Jesus is not always mild and meek. Jesus kneels to wash feet, eats with sinners, soon will submit to the cross. But in this story, he is enraged. So what causes his ire? Were not the people selling cattle, doves, and sheep simply making a living? Providing a needed service? After all, those going to the temple came from great distances to make required sacrifices; they had to buy those animals somewhere. Coins needed to be exchanged so that offerings could be made with the right currency. Why does this seemingly needful activity elicit Jesus’ fury?

The answer lies not so much in the “what” as in the “how” of this buying and selling. Buying and selling, providing services – nothing is inherently sinful in such practices. However, when they take advantage of the place, time, and market, Jesus gets mad. When money is loaned at exorbitant rates to those without other options, Jesus forms a whip of cords. When merchants price gouge in the aftermath of a disaster, Jesus starts turning tables. When corporations create fake accounts, add fees, and penalize those unable to pay them, Jesus’ anger grows. When worship becomes an occasion for exploiting people, Jesus unleashes his wrath. How we earn and use our coins matters to Jesus. It matters a great deal, in fact. Jesus cares about how we behave not just in the temple but just outside of it and well beyond its doors. Gentile or Jew, merchant, currency changer, or worshiper, how we make our money concerns the Lord of all.

I often wish the ledger of my checking account was off-limits to my Lord. I wish Jesus did not care about where my purchasing habits impacted the people around the globe who produced the goods I buy. Life would be far less complicated if Jesus allowed me to compartmentalize my economic choices from my spiritual practices. If only I could look at just the images of Jesus with the lamb, the children, and the towel around his waist. But all four Gospels give us the account of Jesus cleansing the temple, and therefore I must reckon with how

Jesus regards my relationship to money and whether or not how I make and use it is cause for his anger or praise (Jill Duffield, *Lent in Plain Sight*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2020: 76-78).

We are seeing a light at the end of this dark tunnel of the pandemic – vaccines are being distributed, case counts are down, there is talk that by the end of May any adult who wishes to receive a vaccine will be able to get one. Those are signs of hope, to be sure. But the long-lasting impact of this year-long struggle will be felt for months and years to come.

Which begs the question: how will we share God's light and speak God's love as disciples of the one who demands us to be faithful to him and not our worldly comforts? Will we recognize the deep needs in our community – from economic inequity to child poverty to housing shortages to mental health concerns – and turn over the tables so that all of God's children might be made whole and well? Or will we cower in fear when we see Jesus coming into the temple, realizing that we are complicit in the routines that he wishes to cleanse and overturn? Are we willing not only to clean house but also clean our souls, so that we are put on a path that faithfully follows our Lord to Jerusalem and what awaits him there?

Let me close with the prayer that Jill Duffield shares for her devotional on this passage: Lord of all, no part of our lives is off-limits to you. You require us to be faithful in little and in much, with our money, our time, and our talents. If there are practices in which we engage that make you angry, send your Spirit so that we will see where we fall short and change our ways. Pour out coins, turn over tables, chase far from us whatever offends you and keeps us from worshiping you in truth. Amen (ibid).