

Spring Cleaning

John 2:13-22
March 15, 2009

I.

Our schedule for Sunday, April 19, shows that it's our day for spring clean-up at the church. We will get rid of dead leaves, grass, and branches so that new growth can flourish. And today's Gospel reading was a form of spring cleaning for Jesus, wasn't it? He challenged some old temple practices so that people could have a new understanding of his ministry.

We probably are familiar with this story. It's one of those biblical accounts of Jesus' life that spill over into secular culture. The phrase "den of thieves" comes from this story as told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It has been depicted in paintings by Rembrandt, El Greco, and others.

Jesus went into the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, and drove away the cattle and sheep and doves that were there. He even made a whip of cords that he apparently used on somebody or something. It's the only example in the Bible of Jesus doing anything even remotely violent during his life.

And this was from the person who said blessed are the peacemakers, and love your enemies, and forgive others as you are forgiven. It was from the person who calmly and gently dealt with public attacks and trick questions from the scribes and Pharisees. What came over Jesus to cause him to do something that seems completely alien to his nature and teachings?

In addition, this story is in all four Gospels, although it takes place either at the beginning or the end of Jesus' ministry, depending upon which one you read. That's because some parts of the Gospels are organized by topic rather than chronology. But the fact that all four Gospels record the story shows that it was an important event in Jesus' life.

And, of course, there is the basic question: Why did he do it? I will get to that shortly, but first there are some other preliminary questions. Let's begin by asking why money changers and people selling animals were in the temple in the first place. Why did Jesus come to temple? And what was the problem with what he saw?

II.

As context for the story, we should know that many Jews believed Temple worship had been corrupt for over two centuries. A Jewish dynasty before the time of Christ threw out the traditional priests who had served since King Solomon's time eight hundred years earlier, and appointed their own political priests. This resulted in division, internal conflict, and formation of various factions such as the Pharisees and Sadducees who did not even exist in Old Testament times.

This departure from earlier temple standards also led to commercialization of the temple courts in order to, depending on one's perspective, either accommodate or take advantage of Jewish pilgrims who came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

And here's how it worked. Worship in the temple involved paying a temple tax, and making a ritual sacrifice of animals. The problem with the tax was that the region had been conquered by Rome, and Roman coins were the currency in use. And these coins had an image of Caesar on them, which was blasphemy to religious Jews. It violated the first commandment about other Gods, and the second commandment about graven images or idols.

And although Jews did not have much choice about using Roman money in everyday life, they refused to do so in the temple. As a result, a cottage industry of money changers arose who exchanged Roman coins for other coins without images so they could be accepted in the temple.

A business also arose with animals. Many pilgrims came from long distances and it was easier just to buy sacrificial animals when they got to Jerusalem than to worry about bringing them along on the trip. In addition, the temple animals were guaranteed to be kosher, whereas the priests might reject a non-temple animal by finding a blemish somewhere.

So, you can see the problems, and you might think these activities were established as a public service to help people worship. Sure. When was the last time you exchanged U.S. dollars for local currency in a foreign country and felt that you received a public service? These money changers and animal sellers charged excessive premiums and took advantage of the travelers, and there is evidence that some of this money found its way into the pockets of temple priests.

It's also helpful to understand that the atmosphere of Passover in Jerusalem at that time was not unlike mardi gras in New Orleans on Fat Tuesday. The Jewish historian Josephus said that the population of Jerusalem increased from about forty thousand to almost three million during Passover, and that over a quarter million lambs alone were sacrificed each year (Wars, 6.9.3).

This also explains why Jesus was there, in addition to all the other reasons related to his earthly destiny. Jewish tradition required worshippers to come to Jerusalem during Passover if at all possible, and he and his disciples came to the temple as part of that tradition.

Finally, to give some scale to the story, the temple with its surrounding courts was huge. Depending upon whose data you use, it occupied a space equivalent to twenty to thirty football fields. And even though these commercial activities I described only occurred in the outer court, they still were extensive and well within the temple walls.

III.

With this background let's consider what happened in the reading. Jesus came in and trashed the place, or at least part of it. Imagine the scene. Money flying around and rolling on the floor. Cattle and sheep released from their pens, bleating and mooing and stampeding about. Birds squawking and flying everywhere. Noise, chaos, dust, yelling, and shouting.

Did Jesus lose it here? Or was it a righteous reaction? Some say he was very angry and it showed his human nature. But it's also human nature to plan, and do things for effect. Many good trial lawyers tell you they never lose control of their emotions in a courtroom. If they seem angry or upset, it's a demeanor intentionally adopted. Was this what Jesus did?

And what did he think immediately afterward? Perhaps he looked back, surveyed the damage, and thought, "Oh, that felt good." Or did he say, "My God, what have I done?" Or maybe like my father said when I was a boy, Jesus also said, "That hurt me more than it hurt you."

I am inclined to think Jesus was not angry in an out-of-control sense, and he did this to make a point. He saw the hypocrisy in how worship in the temple was not only corrupted but also commercialized, and he recognized a vast gulf between what he preached and what people were doing. Perhaps it would have been different if the activities occurred outside the temple.

But it also is likely that Jesus was not trying to permanently stop the practices to which he objected. He knew his destiny was to redefine a new temple, not reform the existing one. In fact, elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus revealed his knowledge that the temple would be entirely destroyed (Mt. 24:2), which actually happened about thirty-five years later. That explains why he proclaimed that he, himself, was the temple, and would be raised three days after his death.

As a result, part of this reading tells us that God's temple today is not a building, or a place like Jerusalem, or Canterbury, or Rome, or Mecca, or even St. Thomas. God's temple is the body of Christians throughout the world who come together in communities of faith to share

worship and fellowship, and to reach out to others. None of that, however, was evident to Jesus in the temple, and he decisively made his point.

IV.

Now, let's fast-forward the story. What would happen, hypothetically, if Jesus came to some twenty-first century churches? Now I realize that idea is not supported by Scripture, but just bear with me anyway. Suppose he came for a sneak preview. Where would he see hypocrisy? What would he want to cleanse?

Certainly he could find churches that care more about being businesses than churches. He could find churches where the Easter egg hunt is a bigger deal than the resurrection. And he probably could find churches where it's more important that visitors fill out a pledge card than a pew card.

And there's no doubt he would hear worldly justifications for unspiritual practices. Remember the recent news stories about drive-in churches in California. Someone comes by with a service bulletin instead of a menu. What would Jesus say about discipleship and fellowship in that kind of so-called community?

But he also would find some faithful churches where God's Word is taught and preached. He would find clergy and congregations where people care for each other and try to take their faith beyond the church doors. That's part of our work and mission here at St. Thomas.

And as we do that work in a broken and secular world, we act within the context of two realities at the core of today's reading. First, our lives are different from those who do not believe. Otherwise, what's the point of claiming to be Christians? And second, the ways of the church are different from the ways of the world. Otherwise, how can we claim to serve God in a community?

And we are different. Our faith transforms us and the Holy Spirit builds up the church. They guide us in this life and secure our hopes in the next. And although we live in the world and want to raise our families and help those around us, we also know that through God's grace in Jesus Christ this world is just a temporary stop on the way to living eternally with God.

Even so, we're in no hurry to do that. A popular country-western song by Kenny Chesney tells us that everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to go now. We are called to do our work here, to bring people to Christ now, and to be examples in the best sense of the word, not examples of false piety as in the Jerusalem temple.

Jesus' actions told us what he thought about the temple. And now he has replaced the temple and left the church behind to do his work until he comes again. Through that church, the church as he intended it to be, he is among us and open to all who accept him.

V.

So, today's reading actually is more about who Jesus is rather than what he did. While his dramatic actions in the Jerusalem temple might be the stuff of paintings and shorthand clichés, the idea of himself as an entirely new temple foreshadowed his eternal ministry to humanity. And while the headline of the day might have been "Jesus Trashes Temple," the larger story is that Jesus began to reveal how he eventually would offer the opportunity of salvation to all.

But, even so, the images of the reading are important because Jesus also proclaimed the folly of those who subvert the church for their own purposes. Jesus said no more business as usual then, and those words apply with equal force now. Watch television and read the newspapers, and examples are obvious. If Jesus would come again as I speculated, he again would have an opportunity to demonstrate that it's never too late to do some spring cleaning. *Amen.*