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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Third Sunday in Lent – Sunday, March 7, 2021
John 2:13-22

I really dislike a messy house. Many of you may already know this about me, but I can't stand piles of stuff laying around and things out of place. I drive my family crazy because the first thing I do when I walk in the house is start to tidy up, sometimes even before I greet them properly. It's just that I feel so much better – I can relax – if my spaces are organized, tidy, and clean. The messiness makes me tense and anxious.

I also can't stand it when you've just shoved stuff into a closet for months and shut the door – like it isn't all there... I mean, who do you think you're fooling? I can feel the psychic weight of mess behind the closed doors – I can just feel the tension mount. It's why I could never watch the tv show "Hoarders" – it just made me too anxious. But – Oh! – how I love to clean out those closets!

Our gospel lesson today is commonly called The Cleansing of the Temple. It is a dramatic story found in all four of our gospels, although there are a few differences between them. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the Synoptic Gospels – this story occurs in the Passion Narrative, the last week of Jesus' earthly life. Following his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem while riding a donkey and to the cries of Hosanna by the crowds, Jesus then proceeds to the temple to stage his dramatic protest. This scene at the temple is understood in these Gospels as an intrinsic part of the Passion Narrative and is directly connected to Jesus' death. The focus here is on Jesus' affirmation of the Temple as a "house of prayer for all nations" and condemnation of it having become a "den of robbers."

The scene for Jesus' symbolic and dramatic protest is set in the very large outer court of the temple – the Court of Gentiles. The temple, as all of Jerusalem, is busy, crowded, and loud in the days leading up to the high holy celebration of Passover. The air is thick with heated political and military tensions, holiday excitement, religious observance and fervor, and the sheer crush of overflowing populations of people. Historians say that as many as 300,000 to 400,000 pilgrims would pack Jerusalem. And the outer court of the temple is where pilgrims and tourists from around the world would gather to worship, visit with each other, exchange foreign currency, and purchase their sacrificial animals. It is in the midst of this busyness, noise, and confusion that Jesus stages his symbolic protest by driving out "those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple," and overturning the tables of money changers and the seats of those who sold animals.

In the Gospel of John, this scene occurs at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, following the Wedding at Cana. It is still the time of Passover but John amps up the drama even more than the Synoptic evangelists. Rather than merely yelling at the folks conducting business in the court to leave, John has Jesus making a whip of cords to use to drive them out while proclaiming, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" This dramatic scene concludes with Jesus saying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" and John telling the reader that Jesus was "speaking of the temple of his body."

Throughout the millennia since this scene occurred, interpretations of this incident have varied. Popular in many Christian teachings was the notion that Jesus decried the temple business as being necessarily predatory and exploitative of the poor and marginalized. This conventional wisdom, however, is not supported by scripture. Jesus did not hate the temple, nor did he reject it. Indeed, he called the temple his "Father's house." Jesus was not opposed to purity laws and often instructed those he had healed of infirmities to go to the priest to be declared clean. Jesus also says nothing about the temple exploiting the population or being exclusionary. So, if Jesus wasn't necessarily denouncing the temple practices what was the target of his protest?

Time and again throughout our scriptures, Jesus calls us to turn our attention away from the distractions of outer judgment and instead to focus on the inner state of our hearts. In Matthew, Jesus condemns as hypocrites those who, “clean the outside of the cup..., but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” and instructs them to “first clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside may become clean.” (23:25-26) In Luke, Jesus teaches his disciples the importance of judging oneself before turning attention on another with these words, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (6:41)

Perhaps we see Jesus’ redirection of one’s judgment to our own inner motivations and desires of our hearts most clearly with how he summarizes the Jewish Law. Jewish law is comprised of 613 commandments – we heard ten of them in our first lesson this morning. With this great volume of commandments, it is understood in the Jewish tradition that each are not of equal importance and that there are greater and lesser laws. In order to provide a guide with which to understand the law and how one should live by it, teachers often summarized the law in a way that emphasizes the most important aspects. Think of the prophet Micah who summarized the law as these three commandments: to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8)

Likewise, Jesus summarizes the law as first loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and then loving our neighbor as ourselves. (Mark 12:29-31) For Jesus, the greater concern is not on strict adherence to each of the six hundred and some laws, with their focus on the do’s and don’ts, shoulds and must nevers. Jesus insists we instead focus on love of God and neighbor first and foremost, and in doing so we will find ourselves in the right relationship with God and others in such a way that naturally achieves the purpose of the totality of the Law.

So, back to the question at the core of this text. Is Jesus’ protest at the temple a condemnation of the institutional and systemic sin or a call for an inner cleansing of one’s own heart – a call to see one’s own complicity and corruption? My answer here, as you can probably guess, is “Yes.” Yes, Jesus is concerned with cleansing the temple and its ritual practices – concerned about making sure that all the busyness happening there is actually done in service to prayer and worship of God. Yes, Jesus is probably concerned that much of the business occurring at the Temple is, at best, a distraction and, at worst, self-serving and perhaps more about lining one’s pockets or boosting one’s ego than giving glory to God. Yes, this is a story of judgment against corruption within our institutions. Certainly, Jesus is never more appealing to many of us than when he is confronting injustice, hypocrisy, and the misappropriation of God’s name. But we shouldn’t rest too comfortably in this narrative of righteous judgment of institutions and systems, for Jesus is always pointing beyond the systemic and to the particular.

So, yes, this is also about us and the state of our hearts. Jesus is interested in wholesale reform – reform of the systems of injustice as well as reform of the hearts of the many individuals who, wittingly or not, participate in the injustice. Indeed, reform of the institution begins with the reform and reconciliation of the individual heart. Everyone at the temple – and all of us here now – are called to examine our intentions and motivations and to clean the inside of our own bowls.

The big question that this text raises for us today is this: what would Jesus see if he entered our own sanctuaries; our own churches; our own hearts? Would he overturn our cherished rationalizations and drive us out in the name of God? What hypocrisies would he find? What justifications of ours would he call out as shameful?

This is the real challenge of Jesus’ protest at the temple and what it means for us today. It is simply too easy to pass judgment on other people two millennia ago. Jesus’ protest must rest in history but always be allowed to be active in the present. Jesus calls us to look at systemic injustice, yes, but then to always return our attention to the state of our own hearts. How are we complicit? How are we participating in the injustice? How are our hearts also corrupted by selfishness and self-righteousness?

This is the hard work that is set before us during Lent. This is the season when we turn our search lights for sin inward and instead shine it deep within our hearts. And we ask God for the courage to withstand that unsparing light. Where are we not showing welcome and hospitality? When is our attention caught on the distraction of the signpost and not that to which it points? When do we forget the primary commandment to love and instead rest more comfortably on judgement?

This is challenging and uncomfortable work, but may do so drawing strength from the promise that our Lenten labor is done to prepare our hearts for Easter resurrection. Because when we throw upon our closet doors and face the mess that is there; when we toss out our rationalizations and sweep up our hypocrisies; when we clean the inside of our bowls and wash away the film over the eyes of our hearts, we may then see more clearly those tender shoots of new life emerging in our midst.

Amen.