

“SPRING HOUSECLEANING!”

John 2:13-22

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When I was growing up, cleaning the house was a weekly chore. As we kids got older, we were expected to help. We had our assignments: running the vacuum cleaner, dusting, changing the beds, and things like that. But when the weather began to get nice, my mother would announce that it was time for **spring housecleaning**. Typically, that meant a change in the normal routine for at least a week. Storm windows came out, were stored in the garage, and screens were washed and put in the windows. Drapes would be taken down and sent to the cleaners. Kitchen and bathroom curtains would be washed. All the walls in the house would be wiped from top to bottom, and a green substance known as “wallpaper compound” would be used to get the dust and cobwebs off the wallpaper. Everything came out of the closets, as they were thoroughly cleaned, and the clothes were reorganized as they went back in. Winter coats, heavy wool pants and sweaters were packed away in moth balls, and lighter, summer clothes were hung in the closets. All the dishes came out of the cupboards, and the cupboards and the dishes were washed before anything went back on the shelf. By the time this arduous process was complete, the whole house had a different look to it. It even smelled different. And my mother would get a satisfied look on her face. The spring housecleaning was complete!

This morning’s Gospel lesson is the story of a spring housecleaning in Jerusalem. Jesus comes to the temple in the springtime, Passover time, and he is not happy with what he sees. It is not the dust and the cobwebs that bother Jesus. It is the fact that the temple has become a marketplace where enterprising merchants are out to make a buck at the expense of those who are vulnerable.

In the days of Jesus, people came from many places to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was a great event in the city, and even the temple courtyard was filled with merchants peddling their wares. On the face of it there was nothing to argue with. Worshipers from Galilee might travel three or four days on foot and find it impossible to bring a spotless lamb or carry two doves that distance without any bruising that would make them unacceptable as a sacrifice. What better than to make such animals available to pilgrims — at a slight markup, of course. Also, since the temple taxes had to be paid in local currency, money changers were on hand to exchange foreign money. This created the practice by some of charging exorbitant fees for their services. Weary travelers were simply at the mercy of these sellers of livestock and the moneychangers.

Enter Jesus. When he sees what is taking place, he becomes very emotional. In fact, he becomes angry, and his anger leads him to do some surprising things — some things that seem out of character for this man who will be arrested, tried in a court of law and eventually executed without argument or physical resistance of any kind. Yes, Jesus is angry as he comes into the

temple that morning. The Bible tells us that he makes a whip of chords and drives the merchants and the animals they are selling out of the temple. Then he pours out the coins of the money changers, and overturns their tables.

The Gospel writer quotes a verse from Psalm 69, "*Zeal for your house will consume me,*" to describe Jesus' actions. What does it mean to be consumed with zeal for God's house? This verb "consume" is a potent word. In the 19th Century, tuberculosis was called consumption, and the image is now often used to describe the spreading of cancer in the human body. To be eaten up does not describe a state of health. When something is "eating at us," as we say, it means that we are bothered and upset.

I believe that the Gospel writers chose their words carefully and deliberately. Jesus is consumed with zeal for God's house. He is passionate about what is going on in the temple. Notice, first of all, that there is no condemnation of Jesus' anger. It is our belief that Jesus was fully human, and anger is one of our normal human emotions. Jesus got angry at times. Jesus also acted on his anger. He saw the injustice of the temple practice, that enterprising merchants were taking advantage of the poor in the name of organized religion. His anger led him to action. The Bible says Jesus was consumed with zeal for his Father's house. But Jesus' anger did not consume him. Instead he used it constructively to give the temple a good spring housecleaning.

What does it mean to be consumed? I think it means that we are so focused on one thing that we cannot get it off our minds. If the conversation goes a different direction, we manage to get it back to that subject. It seems that increasingly people in our day are being consumed with materialism and the things that money can buy. They are so concerned about money that they can think or talk about nothing else. Greed has led to the current economic crisis worldwide. Greed threatens to consume us, and to destroy our way of life.

Jesus was trying to show that life is not about making money; not that business is bad, but that the temple was supposed to be set aside for godly purposes, not earthly endeavors. It was a place for worship, not entrepreneurship. It was a place for communion, not commerce. It was a place for reverence, not retail. It was a place to seek forgiveness, not fortune; peace, not profit.

The point of the story of Jesus driving the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple is not to condemn fund-raising in the church, but to condemn those who would use the church for the wrong reasons. The church is a place for fellowship, and relationships often grow and blossom here. That is a blessing to all of us. But relationships are a bi-product of our commitment to the things of the Spirit. About a year ago, a man who listens to our program on the radio contacted me. He wanted to know if there were any eligible bachelors in our congregation. If so, he would encourage his daughter to begin attending our church!

From time to time I am contacted by companies who want a copy of our membership directory and better yet, our mailing list. They have products they are sure our members need and want. Today's Gospel lesson is a warning for those who would turn the church into a marketplace. People who have money as their consuming passion do not see the gathered congregation the way we do. They see the church as a potential place to make a deal. In our day, as in Jesus' day, there is a fine line between the church as a sacred space and the church as a marketplace. There are those who will use Christian language and quote Scripture if they think it will eventually allow them entrance into the wallets of believers.

We must be wise in our dealings with those who do business in church. Church is not primarily a place to make connections with other people for business ventures. It is a place to make connection with God for spiritual growth. If there are potential business ventures through those we meet in church, Jesus gives us strong encouragement — dare I say warning ----to separate business from the life of worship.

Now it's easy to point a finger at those who seem consumed by the desire for money and material things. It's easy to point a finger at those who come to church for the wrong reasons. Some of you know that my dad is a retired United Methodist pastor. I remember the sermon he preached in which he said, "Be careful when you point a finger at someone, because when you point a finger, three fingers point back at you." Now my sister and I, just to be smart, tried to prove him wrong. We tried to point without those fingers pointing back at us. But we got the idea. The Gospel isn't for the other guy. The Gospel message is for us. Jesus is not talking about them. He is talking about you and about me.

I love this church. I love the beauty and the majesty of the sanctuary. I love the intimacy of the chapel and the openness and clean lines of the Great Hall. I love our places of worship, and every time I am part of a service in any of these venues I am inspired by the architecture, as well as by the words and the music that we share.

Jesus wanted the temple kept for sacred purposes, and so do I. But Jesus was concerned not only about a building of stone and wood and metal, he was also concerned, especially concerned, about the individuals who populated that building. "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" The people thought he was talking about the building, which had been under construction for 46 years. (Our Trustees are able to relate to these multi-year projects.) But Jesus was talking about the temple of his body and ours. The temple needed a good spring housecleaning. Jesus needed to get the moneychangers out of there. Our homes may need a good spring housecleaning as well. But the real cleaning needs to be done in your life and in mine. "*Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary,*" we sing. The most important concern is not what our church looks like, or what our house looks like. The most important thing is what our lives look like. What is the consuming passion of your life and mine? Lent is traditionally a time to look inside, and a time for cleansing. It may be time for a good spring housecleaning at your house. I know it is at mine.

Jesus was consumed with zeal for God. What is consuming us? Is it the relentless pursuit of material things? Are we consumed with getting ahead, getting our kids into the right schools, giving them the best opportunities? Are we consumed with making ends meet in this topsy-turvy economy? Are we consumed with preserving our dignity in these tough and challenging time? I recently learned of a man who lost his job, but to keep up appearances, he got up, got dressed up every morning, and walked to the Rapid with his briefcase under his arm. Then at night, he rode the Rapid back home. It was weeks until anyone in the neighborhood realized that he had lost his job. Are we concerned with keeping up appearances, or are we consumed with seeking God's will and purpose for our lives and getting closer to him? Do we come to church to network with the right people, or do we come to strengthen our connection with God?

When Jesus saw people being taken advantage of in his day, he became angry. Does injustice anger us? Does it bother you that there are children without adequate nourishment and health care, not only in other parts of the world, but right here in our city? Does it eat at you that

there are families without a place to live? Does it bother you that there are elderly people struggling to survive, that there are people who must live in fear, each and every day of their lives? Does that anger you? Does that eat at you?

More important, does your anger lead you to action in your daily life? Are you committed to work on behalf of justice for those who are oppressed and those who cannot help themselves?

If you are anything like me, then it's time for a good spring housecleaning. It's time to get the cobwebs out and let the realities of today's world motivate us to action. It's time to join Jesus in driving out injustice and overturning the tables of greed and self-centeredness and self-service. It's time to express our zeal for the things of the Spirit.

Yes, I need to give my house a good spring cleaning! What about you?

Prayer: Dear God, when we read about Jesus cleansing the temple, we realize that our houses need a good cleaning as well. As Jesus saw people being taken advantage of and became angry, so enable us to respond with anger to the injustices of our world today. May we be consumed with zeal for building a better world, following the direction of our Lord. Amen.