

“Spring Cleaning”

John 2:12-22

3/26/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

The Event Order

According to John, it wasn't long after He went to a wedding in Cana, up in Galilee county, that Jesus and His friends went to Jerusalem for the Passover holiday. It was the middle of April and according to the Jewish law, every adult Jewish male living within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was to participate in the holiday rituals at the temple. But there's a question about when Jesus did this unusual act in the temple.

The sequence of events in John is different from what is found in Mark, Matthew and Luke. In the first three gospels, Jesus went to Jerusalem only once at the **end** of His ministry. At this time, Jesus made His entry into the city (with the crowds and the palms). He cleansed the temple and He was put to death in a few days.

In contrast, John has Jesus cleansing the temple at the **start** of His three year ministry. Which way did it happen?

Part of what is happening is that Mark, Matthew and Luke concentrate on Jesus' ministry up in Galilee but John focuses only on His activity in Jerusalem. Biblical researchers have tried to explain this difference about the timing of the temple cleansing in several ways.

The majority of interpreters understand that John was not interested in writing a meticulous documentary about the sequence of Jesus' experiences. He just wasn't interested in keeping the chronological order that the other three writers had in their gospel accounts. He was more interested in talking about Jesus then getting the chronology lined up.¹ So John's scrapbook

¹ John spent most of his writing time proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah – “The Word made flesh.” John was not as interested in when Jesus cleansed the temple so much as telling that Jesus did, in fact, cleanse the temple. He included that scene for the purpose of showing that Jesus was the promised Messiah of God. Only John said that the disciples remembered the passage from psalms about the promised One having a zeal for the temple. Only John said that the disciples remembered, in

of remembrances of Jesus had this picture near the beginning, not in chronological order as the other gospels.²



El Greco's 16th century depiction of Jesus cleansing the Temple

The Passover

The Passover was the greatest of all the Jewish feasts, because it commemorated their dramatic exodus from national slavery and the start of their nation. Historians estimate that as many as two and a quarter million Jews might assemble in Jerusalem to keep the Passover. At this time in the first century, the temple cult was still alive and strong – even though the Pharisees had started a portable version of Judaism that would eventually replace this dependence on the temple cult after the year 70 CE.³

During the holiday, every Jewish male over nineteen had to pay a temple tax that amounted to two day's wages. With all of these people visiting from out of town, there were two things going on in the temple that set the stage for Jesus' dramatic behavior. There was currency exchange and the sale of sacrificial animals.

Pilgrims arrived in the city from all over the world with all kinds of coins. There were the silver coins from Rome and Greece, Egypt, Tyre and Sidon but the temple didn't take travelers' checks. The temple tax, and the animals sold in the temple, had to be bought with either Galilean shekels or with temple coins. These coins and the other currencies were foreign and were therefore considered to be technically “unclean” by the priests. In the temple courtyards, then, there had to be currency exchange services.

hind sight, that Jesus' words about a destroyed and rebuilt temple in three days was a prediction of His death and resurrection.

² Just as you or I might arrange pictures in a family photo album by themes or other groupings rather than by dates.

³ CE means in the common era (which is what AD used to mean). In 70, Jerusalem & its temple were destroyed by the Romans.

If their money changing would have been honest, things would have been o.k. but they charged for the currency exchange. The greater the amount of money to be converted, the higher the rate of exchange – sometimes amounting to as much as a day’s wage. Historians noted that the wealth acquired from the temple tax and from the currency exchange rates was significant. When Crassus raided the temple treasury in 54 B.C.E.,⁴ he and his troops couldn’t believe the millions of dollars that had accumulated in the temple vaults.

What enraged Jesus that morning was that many people coming to the Passover were poor and had sacrificed much to make this holiday pilgrimage to the temple. Some couldn’t afford to have their money changed into the proper coins to buy their sacrificial pigeons. He saw that the common folk were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by they money-changers. It was a shameful social injustice and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion.

Besides the currency exchangers, there were also merchants who sold oxen, sheep and doves. As you know, a visit to the temple usually meant a sacrifice. Whether it was for a thank offering or an atonement for sins, a person was to bring an animal before the temple altar fires. It was convenient that these sacrificial animals could be purchased on the premises but here is what had probably happened.

The law was that any animal offered in a sacrifice had to be “perfect and without blemish.” The temple authorities appointed inspectors to examine the animals and there was a fee for this as well. Maybe they had a blue stamp saying: ‘Jerusalem inspected grade A.’ If a worshipper brought in an animal from outside the temple, it very well may not have passed the blemish inspections because the temple didn’t make any money on it. “Let’s see, looks like this dove has an ingrown toe nail, reject!”

First century historians tell us that an animal that would cost 4 units of money outside the temple

⁴ BCE means Before the Common Era (used to be referred to as BE)

could have cost as much as 75 within. *“Hi, Tommy Van Scoy. Why pay more at the temple for sacrificial animals, when you can have the best, guaranteed to pass inspection?”*

Here, again, Jesus saw outright extortion at the expense of poor and humble people – who were being forced to buy their sacrificial animals from the temple merchants in order to comply with the authorities. These injustices so moved Jesus to anger, that He turned over the tables and drove all the people and animals out of the temple – birds flying all over the place. What a scene.

The different ways the gospel writers describe this give us further clues about why Jesus was angry. Matthew has Jesus referring to the temple staff as “a den of robbers.” Mark has Jesus saying that the temple is to be a house of prayer for all nations.

The temple consisted of a series of courtyards leading into the temple proper, finally to the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies. Furthest out, and the first courtyard you would enter, would be the Court of the Gentiles. Next came the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Israelites, (meaning just the men), then the Court of the Priests. In their very architecture we can see that they expressed how they valued some people as more important than others. Remember that in our churches today, anyone can come up and participate and lead because we are all considered equal in the sight of God and each other.

They did their animal sales and currency exchange in the outer Court of the Gentiles. The temple authorities and the business partner merchants had turned the Court of the Gentiles into Grand Central Station. No one could possibly pray. If they tried, they might get stepped on by an ox. Imagine trying to meditate with all those animals, the sounds of wings flapping in the cages, the hucksters announcing their bargains and exchange rates as well as the rattle of coins and voices raised in bargaining disputes. The place was anything but a place of worship. Jesus was moved to the depths of His Being because people were being shut out from worshipping God by this extortion and hopelessly distracting merchandising.

Today, we obviously do not have extortion in churches and it would be unfair for some to label most Church

fundraising efforts as inappropriate. It is only those who ignore the historical context of these verses who claim that the text is stating that places of worship today shouldn't be involved in fundraising. All of us know that church garage sales and bazaars are strictly social events that happen to raise a few dollars to help the church. It's clear that the few cents people earn for the church per hour doesn't, at all, relate to what they could get for their time and skills in their employment.⁵

So perhaps we might ask ourselves if some people are turned away from worshipping God in our midst because of barriers we've unwittingly erected to block them.

Why do people come to church in the first place? We gather, in part, because of the harshness of life. Life occasionally deals out sad circumstances, tragic losses and profound disappointments.

You and I also gather because of our faith and hope, believing that in this community, we worship the God of the Universe and there is some sense of this community's relationship with an all-powerful and yet loving God Who can help us continue through life. When you see a visitor, remember that this is going on in them.

Instead of being sensitive to that that in others, sometimes we can come into church with a 'burn on,' because someone has crossed us and 'we're just going to keep an eye out for that person.' Or sometimes we're so focused on getting that piece of committee work done in the hall – "we've got to catch them before the coffee hour so we don't have to call them during the week." Our desire for efficiency and accomplished projects can become just as cluttering as the mooing and bleating animal sounds in that Jerusalem temple. Are we creating an atmosphere of worship and a sensitivity to the needs for reverence for God that removes barriers for others who want to focus on God?

⁵ Which is why, in our inflationary economy and our lifestyles of working multiple jobs to stay even with inflation, these kinds of church fund raising events are conducted by only retired people – mainly for their social enjoyment of spending time with others in the church.

There were two reactions to what Jesus did. The disciples were said to be reminded that the Psalms predicted this behavior on the part of the Messiah.⁶

Another reaction came from the Jewish people – probably the temple authorities. Notice that they didn't say that what Jesus did was wrong. They knew things had gotten out of hand and they were caught off guard by Jesus' condemnation of the crooked financing and tasteless clutter of the animals. So, instead of condemning His judgment of their 3-ring circus crassness, they asked about His credentials (of all things). And Jesus' terse statement about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple in three days really threw them for a loop. Immediately these practical business agents of the temple took Him literally and quickly talked about how the temple had been under construction for half a century.

Mark's version gives us a little detail that helps. Jesus said "I will destroy this temple (that is made with hands) and in three days, I will build another (not made with hands). Mark saw that Jesus was ushering in a more accessible Kingdom of God where people can know the presence of the living God without having to depend on organized religion. People could come to God without any temple. That was what the first three gospel writers saw in Jesus' words. John, however, thought that Jesus was only referring to His own coming death and resurrection.

Standing back from his incident, we see that the first three gospel writers saw Jesus' cleansing of the temple as an inauguration of a new order – soon to begin in His death and resurrection. This would create a new openness between people and God without all the control and roadblocks that had been placed between people and God by the organized religion in that time.

Jesus was infuriated with the corruption of these person-made approaches to God and He echoed the previous prophets who had proclaimed that God is frankly fed up with the multitude of sacrifices and

⁶ And in looking back seventy years, John was usually more theological and did a lot of interpreting of the thoughts and reactions of the characters in the story line.

burnt offerings. In their place, God wanted direct life-style changes as evidence that we mean business with God so that we actually bring about justice in *our* behavior and foster love in *our* hearts.

The truth that climaxed in this temple scene was that our access to God's presence is not dependent on anything that people can construct or organize. Whether we are in the street, in the home, at work, in church here or on the road, God is with us and whenever we get serious about God, God is right there with us to take us seriously – right now. As far as your access to God – no one else is needed but you and your attention.

That's what Jesus gave us – direct access to God. With that reminder comes the responsibility for each of us to reflect on how we approach God in our worship experience.

This church and this denomination is not perfect and neither are the others. Obviously we have responsibilities that prohibit us from participation in everything going on in the church. Occasionally we hear that things some individuals do are revolting and down right infuriating. But if Jesus would suddenly become visible, what kinds of things would He perhaps angrily clear away from *our* lives?

When clergy get together, they commonly tell stories about pockets of disenchanting church members who periodically boycott their church – just to express their frustration and to try to get other's attention. In these almost predictable cases, even when church staff and church leaders attempt to contact these people, they just don't want to talk about it (at least face-to-face and openly). But what they don't realize is that their withdrawal from the one community (that could nurture them and show them grace and from which they could learn in their life) – their negativity usually erects a blockade in their worshipping community. But their boycott is really between them and God and the worshipping community. Some people even go to their graves, disenfranchised, alienated and alienating to others. They couldn't act like that in a career or they'd be fired. Would God ever fire us for unprofessional behavior in God's business of life?

You know, after the dust was cleared and the pigeon feathers settled on the marble floor of the temple, the Reverend Fathers and the Temple Chairs of the Board were scared stiff. Before them stood One Who had not only exposed their crass and contemptible merchandising of the faith – this One was full of the wrath of God.

Twentieth Century American Christianity has often been thought of as a comfortable, middle-class, good-natured, polite collection of volunteers who conveniently schedule service projects. Amiable, friendly, non-confronting and pleasant. But while we should remember the compassionate nature of God, we would be wise, I think, to also remember the awesome holiness of God that burns with an irresistible heated rage at injustice and corruption that takes advantage of the less powerful in society.

As we reflect on our sense of reverence for God – Who is immediately present with us – pause to reflect if there are things with which we have become comfortable that might, someday, be turned over in a rage by God. Have we erected barriers of gossip?

Have we made our need to do a certain project our own way so important above all else, that we have forgotten that someone might be there to help just to spend time with some compassionate human beings instead of only listening to their constantly-playing radio and TV in their apartment?

You, and everyone around you, is a temple of God's Spirit. We are creatures made primarily for relationships, but to what extent do we permit others to enter the courts of our personal temple?

We usually reserve *parts* of our lives only for *certain* people, don't we? You and I are something like the Jerusalem Temple courts – letting others gain conditional and limited access to us. But as different people come into our lives, to whatever extent that we let them come into the temple complex of our personality, how much access do they have to God through us? Would people, who cross the thresholds of our personality, know that they stand in the presence of a child of the living God? ■