

March 26, 2006
John 2: 13-22
First Parish Church
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Spring Cleaning

When we were moving from Arizona to Maine, I knew for a year ahead of time about the move. The good news is this gave us lots of time to go through our stuff. The bad news is this gave us lots of time to go through our stuff. I got rid of a lot of stuff.

I took three carloads to our children's school's yard sale. I took garbage bag loads of clothes to a local charity. I filled our alley dumpster week after week with stuff. And, still, when we moved into our house here and unloaded boxes, I found myself thinking, "Now, why did I bring that?"

We know that we are a consumer culture. One of the big problems with that is we have become a culture of stuff. I remember asking a group of youth once what they did to help out at home. One girl groaned and said her mother made her pick up the stuff in her room before the cleaning lady came. Stuff, stuff everywhere.

Churches have the same dilemma. We are in the process of converting the stage in Fellowship Hall to a Youth Room. Our custodian, Rob Rowe, in this past week, filled bag after bag of things we no longer use that were stored on and around the stage. On Friday, I worked with the youth to clear out more stuff. You know how God said, "Be fruitful and multiply." I think the stuff heard those words and did exactly that.

Spring cleaning makes us feel good because we un-encumber ourselves from

stuff. But, not all our clutter is physical. In the Lenten study groups that are meeting on Mondays, we are reading a book by Joyce Rupp, entitled *The Cup our Life*. One of the sections of the book was about clutter. This is what she had to say about spiritual clutter...

There are so many kinds of inner clutter. Things like anxiety, resentment, harsh judgments, self-pity, and mistrust can take up a lot of inner space. The strident voices, negative thoughts, useless fears and worries, old wounding messages, and the "have to's and want to's" that bully me around, squeeze out the good things that are waiting for me. ... Anything can be clutter if it keeps me totally absorbed in myself and unaware of what God is offering to me. Even very wonderful things such as success, knowledge, beauty, and pleasure can become "clutter" when I seek these things madly and at any cost, obsessed with having more, clutching them closely to me, or putting all my energy into preserving them. (pg. 47-48)

The spiritual discipline of giving up something for Lent is a practice of spring cleaning. It is the practice of clearing away some habit in order to be more open to the presence of God. Have you noticed how many people give up a certain food for Lent – chocolate, soda, sweets? Maybe it suggests that our diets are cluttered with many things that are not good for us.

We live with physical clutter. We live with spiritual clutter. We live with gastronomic clutter. And then there is institutional clutter. Today's story shows Jesus' response to a situation of institutional religious clutter of his time.

The setting for today's gospel story is the Passover. The preparations for Passover would involve all the activity that we associate with Christmas – preparations to travel, visiting relatives, gifts to give, special holiday meals, ...

Jesus and the disciples and throngs of other pilgrims, up to 100,000 – that's 4 times the population of Brunswick- have arrived in Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover.

Religious practices of the day said the pilgrims must offer a sacrifice at the temple – a dove, a sheep, a cow. However, because of the long distances some people had to travel, it wasn't always possible to bring the sacrifice with them. Therefore, there were merchants in the outer rooms of the temple who sold sacrificial animals to the pilgrims.

Similarly, the pilgrims had to pay a temple tax. However, they could not pay in Roman or Greek coins because such coins had the image of the emperor on them – thus the need of the moneychangers – to convert the coins to Jewish money. These practices were considered necessary for proper religious worship.

You can imagine – the Passover event planners have been at it for weeks to have everything ready – enough sacrificial animals, enough coins, cleaning the temple, food brought into

the city for all the visitors, special foods for the Passover feasts – and who knows what they did in the days before Porta Pottys. Everything is moving smoothly – until Jesus shows up.

In this story, which is often referred to as the cleansing of the temple, Jesus takes a whip of cords, drives the animals out, and then overturns the tables of the moneychangers. Wow! Now that's dramatic spring cleaning. There is a part of me that thinks, "Way to go, Jesus." Yet on the other hand, this is dangerous. This behavior would not show up well on a personality inventory for potential pastors.

By his actions, Jesus is challenging the very authority of the Temple and its cultic practices. And yet he speaks and acts in line with the tradition of the great Jewish prophets as he denounces the ongoing religious emphasis on animal sacrifices. As the prophet Micah (6:6-8) put it:

Shall we come before the Lord with burnt offerings? NO. God has told us what is good, what the Lord requires of us: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

It is not surprising, nor is it news to us, that this experience is likely the 'straw that broke the camel's back' for the temple authorities in their case against Jesus. From then on they are out to get him.

However, for Jesus the time has come. There was no turning back. The traditions of the temple had to be challenged. The rituals of religion were being confused with the presence of God. The rituals of religion were being

confused with the call to love God and neighbor.

The story doesn't say what Jesus was thinking when he "cleansed" the temple. What exactly upset him so?

I suspect that one of the factors in this for Jesus is that the rituals of religion made it difficult for the poor to participate fully in the worship of God. They were not able to 'keep up' with the rituals. They didn't have money to buy sacrifices and to pay the temple tax. Are they not welcome in the fellowship of God's people?

Was Jesus also offended by blood sacrifice? It's so obvious to us that blood sacrifice is not central to worship that it's hard to understand why it was so important to the worshippers of Jesus' day.

This story is particularly challenging because it calls us to consider what religious practices, what ways of being church together, that we practice today are really diverting us from loving God and neighbor and from knowing the presence of God.

What would Jesus feel called to drive out of our sanctuary? What practices and rituals do we have today, that people hundreds of years from now will shake their heads and wonder how we could have thought those things were so important? What practices and customs do we have that separate us from full engagement with the holy?

Institutions always run the danger of collecting accoutrements- of becoming attached to things and customs that begin to hold our attention- to clutter up our

lives- so we lose sight of the very visions that called us together in the first place. Families struggle with this, governments struggle with this, churches struggle with this.

Since I've come here, one of the things I've noticed is a reluctance to talk about complex, difficult issues that are being discussed in the political realm as well as the religious realm. Why is that so? I suspect sometimes it's because our lives often feel so stressful, when we come to church we are looking for a little peace and quiet. I suspect it's also because these issues are often so emotionally intense. We're not just talking about abstract matters. We're talking about real people and often life and death situations. And I think it's because we know we don't agree. We don't agree politically. But we also don't agree theologically.

Yet, there is no issue or situation that is outside the arena of spiritual and religious consideration. We are called to bring our whole lives to our relationship with God.

One of the concerns we face these days is the Iraq war. We are now three years into the war. It is a matter that affects all our lives, and the consequences of this war will ripple through the generations that come after us.

So can we talk? I invite you to join me and others in Fellowship Hall after church for conversation – for an opportunity to express our concerns and our hopes, and to listen carefully to our brothers and sisters who worship with us.