

Those of you who have known me a while, know that I do not think cleanliness is next to godliness. But there are times when cleaning is about more than removing dirt from the floor, dust from the furniture, and bacteria from the sink. Cleaning is first and foremost about welcoming others. When we first wrote on the walls of the sanctuary, Richard and I spent a couple of hours cleaning up debris from the sanctuary so you would have a safe and welcoming experience in there.

Today's story from John is called the "Cleansing of the Temple" It is not a story of dust – unless you want to imagine the dust that was flying when Jesus overturned tables.

Growing up, we were very close to the family next-door who were also in our church. The mom was my piano teacher, the boys were my friends, the girl introduced me to Richard when they were in college, and the dad was really funny – until he had an affair and their marriage broke up. But one thing I always remember him saying to me every time I would leave their house to go home was, "Twiggy, don't forget to keep your nose clean!" No one else called me that. Skinny naïve serious little girl with big eyes, I was always terrified that I had something protruding from my nostrils. He'd laugh at me every time I reached up to check my nose. Only later did I come to appreciate the underlying meaning – Stay out of trouble. It rocked my pubescent world to learn he had not kept his nose clean, and seeing him was rare after that. Keeping your nose clean, stay free of corruption. That's our calling as Christians – to keep our lives clean and in Lent to do some spring cleaning, praying "Lord, make us more holy." As individuals, as a church, and in our common life in the world, we are called to keep it clean – free of corruption. Jesus is not happy when we forget to keep the house of God clean.

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (NRS)

In Ephesians, we hear "Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger." In other words, work it out – don't stay embittered. In many places in the Old Testament we hear that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relents from punishing sin.

So anger is not the problem, Jesus clearly shows us in this passage and in other ones too. It's what you do with your anger. Jesus gets angry verbally in several different places in the Gospels. He says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" In last week's reading, he got mad at Peter for challenging him on his call to suffer and die, and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" Not a sweet comment at all. He rebuked demons while providing healing for those dehumanized by them.

But this is certainly the most physical expression of Jesus' anger. He does not get angry when arrested, when tried, and when whipped himself. He is often patient with those who misunderstand him and challenge his authority. But here he is clearly angry.

He uses a whip to drive out the sheep and cattle, same word used as when the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. In the Greek it is clearer than in English that Jesus is using the whip to drive the animals, not the people. This word for whip is a different word than the word used for the whip they used to abuse Jesus.

It is an aggressive scene no doubt. He does dump out money and overturn tables. In this Gospel, he does not make mention of God's house being a house of prayer as the Synoptic Gospels do. But he's clearly very disturbed about God's house being used as a marketplace. When I was growing up in the southern Presbyterian Church, we never held fundraisers at church because of this passage. Everything was paid for by people's tithes and offerings. While that might be too strict an interpretation of this passage, but the point is there – that the church, the house of God is not a place to be focused on making a buck off people.

Reading all the versions of this story, and this story is in all four Gospels, though only in John does it come so early in Jesus ministry. In the other three, it comes as the pivotal action that inflames the religious leaders to pursue the arrest of Jesus'. But here it is early, and comes at a time of purification before Passover. But Jesus needs no personal purification so he sets himself to purifying the temple itself and ridding it of those powerful who would take advantage of the poor. TV or other mega-church preachers begging for money and then using it to build mansions for themselves come to mind.

The people of God should always be in line with Jesus who calling was to bring good news to the poor, release to captives, freedom to the oppressed, and recovery of sight to the blind. To bring it into modern categories, Jesus was concerned about economic injustice, prisoners and immigrants, health care, including persons with mental illness and disabilities; racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. All the people who were pushed around and ignored, Jesus lifted up. This was a challenge to the status quo. Those who had power – both religious and political power, did not approve of his welcoming and generous attitudes toward those on the margins of life.

And here when he makes it clear that he has authority in “his Father’s house” (not a common term for the temple, you know) he gets the ire of the Jewish leaders. They want proof of his power and authority so he speaks to them in a riddle. Destroy this temple and I will rebuilt it in three days. They find this ludicrous, knowing that they spent forty-six years on it. But the disciples remember this statement later and understand that he was talking of his own body. In Christ, all the fullness of God dwelt. And nothing they could do to him would keep him buried. He lives and so we live.

And now we are religious people building a house for God. We should keep our noses clean. Let us pray that we will avoid doing anything in the name of Christ that is self-serving, like wishing for new members so they can help us pay the mortgage. No we are eager to welcome people into the house of God because we want them to share in the love of Jesus Christ with us for their healing and the peace of the world. Let us be a people zealous for God’s house, eager to please God in our care for those less fortunate than we. Let us be like Christ in lifting up those whom the world would beat down and ignore. Most of all, may we be a humble and generous people, always open to the movement of the Spirit of God who is shaping us, leading us, feeding us, and meeting us now. This next hymn demonstrates in music the way God keeps surprising us with a character that cannot be fully understood or contained. Join me when you are ready to move with God into new keys, new ways of living by grace.