

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, February 15, 2009.

John 2:13-22

On August 21, 2000, I stood in the very spot where the story in today's Gospel lesson took place. I stood on a broad set of stone steps which were once a part of the Temple in Jerusalem. Looking up the steps, I saw ahead of me the Dome of the Rock, a magnificent structure built over the rock where Father Abraham was poised to kill his son Isaac. At the foot of the steps is the Al Aqsa Mosque, another imposing structure. The day we were at the Temple Mount, there were huge crowds, hundreds of tourists from all over the world. It was nearly impossible to get a clear view of anything without someone in the way. Darting here and there among the crowds were young boys, selling postcards, trinkets and cold bottled water. At one point I caught myself looking for the doves, lambs and other sacrificial animals. While others in our tour group quickly mounted the steps to the upper level of the Temple, to the Holy of Holies, and the Dome of the Rock, I stood a little longer on those steps looking out over this wide courtyard, trying to picture it as it might have looked the day Jesus came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and found it a teeming marketplace of vendors and money changers rather than the sacred home of his father. The day Jesus, as we would say today, cleaned house.

Many of you are probably familiar with the series of children's books called the Berenstain Bears. The stories have life lessons for young children taught through the antics of Brother Bear and Sister Bear with the wise counsel of Mama and Papa Bear. One such story is called "The Berenstain Bears and the Messy Room". Its lesson is about house cleaning. The crisis in the story comes when Mama Bear reaches the end of her rope about the mess in Brother and Sister's room. It goes this way:

"Well, the mess just seemed to build up and build up until one day... maybe it was because Mama's back was a little stiff, or maybe it was stepping on Brother's airplane cement, or maybe she was just fed up with that messy room, but whatever it was... Mama Bear lost her temper! She stormed into the cub's room with a big box. 'The first thing we need to do is get rid of all this junk!' she said. Brother and Sister were watching in horror as Mama began to throw their things into the box."(1)

Life gets that ways sometimes. Things pile up and pile up until it just gets to be too much. We have to clean up the mess. It might be a messy room or a messy set of circumstances at work or at home, or a messy relationship with a friend, but there comes a time when we have to clean up. We have to get rid of the junk and throw things away. A mess devalues something of worth – a place, a relationship, an idea. When it's messy, it can't serve its intended purpose. My dining room table is a mess. It is supposed to be the gathering place for family and friends to share a meal. More often, it is the gathering place for stuff – things I need to bring to church, books for school, lists for the grocery store, mail to go out, mail that has come in, and the list goes on. You get the picture. In order to use that table for its intended purpose, I have to clean up.

There are times when a mess can be so serious that only a drastic housecleaning can fix the situation. That's what today's Gospel lesson is about. Jesus found a terrible mess in the

temple and became angry. He actually took a whip and drove the merchants and their livestock out of the temple courtyard where they were conducting business. He turned over tables and he sent the vendors scurrying. We have to think about why this was so disturbing to Jesus that he would handle the situation the way he did, causing such an uproar in a sacred place. Or was it sacred?

This was God's house – literally. Scripture tells us that the temple in Jerusalem was the place where God chose to dwell among his people. In the center of the temple was the Holy of Holies, and in there was the ark of the covenant. Above the ark lived God. The temple was a holy place because it had been set aside as the dwelling place of God. Because the temple was holy, worshippers of God went to great trouble and expense to make pilgrimages to the temple for holy days. Jesus and the disciples were good Jews, so when the Feast of the Passover approached they made their way to the temple. But, when they arrived at God's house, Jesus didn't find what he expected. He expected to hear Psalms being chanted or sung. He expected to see people kneeling or bowing in prayer. He expected to smell sweet incense and burnt offerings. He expected the dwelling place of God to be full of people worshipping God. Instead of Psalms and prayers, he heard the hawking of the vendors, the bleating of sheep and the rattling of coins. Instead of the pleasant smells of incense and burnt offerings, Jesus found the foul smells of animal herders and of sheep and oxen. Instead of worshippers, he found people buying and selling, cheating and stealing. The sights, sounds and smells that Jesus encountered were those of the marketplace not of the temple. The marketplace had taken over the temple and the affairs of the world were being conducted within its walls. If it was no longer separated from the world, it was no longer holy.

This was more than Jesus could take. He drove out the sellers and their animals. He turned over the tables of the money changers. And he said, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace." He cleaned up his father's house.

Many sermons have been preached over the centuries about the evils of churches becoming marketplaces, about whether Bingo and spaghetti dinners are money changing in the temple. If we continue reading John's account of this day in Jerusalem, we hear the people ask Jesus "Show us a sign so that we will know if God has given you authority to do this thing." And Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." This amazed those who were listening. It had already taken 46 years to build that temple, and it still wasn't finished. How could he rebuild it in three days? They did not understand. The temple he was speaking of was himself. God dwelt in Jesus. They destroyed his body just as he said they would, and three days later he was raised again.

The season of Lent gives us the opportunity to clean up our physical and spiritual messes. Both kinds of messes have a few principles in common:

- First, messes build up slowly over time. We don't notice a little dust here, a pile of papers there, a grudge or hurt feelings until we are steeped in the mess that is all around us.
- The longer we live with a mess, the easier it becomes to live with it. It becomes a part of our everyday landscape.

- The longer we live with a mess, the more difficult it is to adequately do the housecleaning. It takes more time and energy than we have.
- And, if we do not clean up our messes, they will finally destroy us in much the same way that the temple system destroyed the worship and reverence for God.(2)

The passage from John's Gospel says that messes can be cleaned up but sometimes it takes radical, table-turning-over housecleaning to set things right. Jesus was appalled by the way the dwelling place of his father in Jerusalem was treated. But then his death and resurrection changed everything. Followers of God no longer need to go to a temple and make sacrifices to demonstrate their love of God. Through his death and resurrection Christ replaced the temple with himself. No longer would God dwell primarily in the Holy of Holies. Jesus became the presence of God in our midst. And he lives within every believer, making each of us a Holy of Holies, a walking temple. It's easy for the merchants and moneychangers to take over our temples. The busyness of our scheduled, programmed, agenda-driven lives can create a huge mess in God's individual dwelling places. They can take over the space in our hearts, squeezing God out or over into a dusty corner. Instead of finding the heart of a worshipper within us, Jesus finds the clutter and grime of impatience, anger, fear, misunderstanding, doubt, and a sometimes desperate longing.

What does "spiritual housecleaning" look like? As we are now at the half-way point in this season of Lent, it could mean looking at how things have been going so far. Think about what you chose to "give up" for Lent. Do you really miss chocolate or fast food or TV all that much? Is it a sacrifice that is really allowing you to learn more about yourself and to draw closer to God? Pick up your spiritual broom and sweep out the dust and clutter that take up so much space in your self. Spiritual housecleaning might come more readily through adding something for the remainder of Lent. When was the last time you stopped to read a poem, to listen to the birds singing, or to sit quietly, watching the sun or moon rise or the rain fall? Spiritual renewal might take the face of adding activities like attending the Monday night study group or the remaining Adult Forums which are all focusing on fasting of various kinds. Spiritual housecleaning could mean scrubbing and polishing old dusty skills like playing Candy Land and Crazy Eights with children whose parents are working very hard to learn English. It could be an activity that has a positive environmental aspect – something as simple as changing light bulbs. Spiritual housecleaning could mean tossing into the waste basket grudges, hard feelings and resentments. It could mean taking steps toward removing from your life something that nags at you, that hinders your productivity or enjoyment of life. Are there modern day moneychangers that you need to drive out of your life? Perhaps this is the time to make the first move to repair a broken relationship, to forgive even if you're tempted to say "well, they started it". If we take the time to go through the nooks and crannies of our inner lives, doing our spiritual housecleaning, we will discover how much more space we have for Jesus, for love, for giving and we can experience the joy of living in a fresh, clean house. This Lent and throughout the year, may God grant us the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives to do the spiritual housecleaning, throwing out the clutter and corruption that will then open up the wide new spaces where God can come and dwell.