

“Cleaning House”

I Cor. 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

San Dimas Community Church United Church of Christ

March 19, 2006

First, I must give credit to the Wednesday morning Bible study group who studied today’s scripture lessons with me and who inspired my thinking. Our attention seemed to focus on the description of Jesus making this whip and driving out the people and even the animals from the temple. We imagined what this chaotic scene must have looked like. This story shows a side of Jesus’ character, namely anger, that we don’t often read of in the gospels. The rest of the week I found myself being drawn back to this image of the angry Jesus who forcefully tells the truth and who stands for God’s truth by cleansing the temple.

The phrase “cleaning house” has multiple meanings. It can mean putting our household belongings in order and getting rid of dirt and trash. “Cleaning house” can be used to mean discarding of what is useless and taking up space. Sometimes this definition even refers to people. When a company “cleans house”, it may fire employees who are not contributing or perhaps even corrupting the organization. Jesus was doing all of the above when he cleansed the temple. He was cleaning God’s house of the people who had corrupted it. Jesus does a thorough housecleaning.

This story in the other gospels follows Jesus entrance into Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus’ grand entrance was modeled after the coronation of generations of kings before him. Jesus’ cleansing of the temple was also an example of what kings throughout centuries of Israelite history did during their reigns. Reforming the temple was what kings did. Jesus just did it in a rather strange and offensive way. Instead of enlisting the temple folk in the process, he says that they are part of the problem. The system is broken and not redeemable. His was not a remodeling job, it was demolition of a system no longer faithful, no longer holy.

In John’s gospel the story comes in chapter two and serves as a sign of Jesus’ role as Son of God. He takes charge of God’s house with zeal. He sets out to “clean house” of all that has become distant and foreign to God’s dream for Israel. There were two ways God’s house was being misused. The first had to do with the money changers who the people were required to go through and who charged enormous exchange rates. And the second was the selling of animals for sacrifice. The animals had to be free of any defect or blemish and they would be examined before being allowed to be sacrificed in worship. It was just easier to buy the animals from an “authorized dealer” who also just happened to be a member of the high priest’s family. Yet, these animals cost the buyer 15 times what the animal was worth. It was price gouging and planned victimization of those coming to the temple to worship. This abuse of the poor, this exploitation of the powerless was what made Jesus so angry.

It’s easy to be a Monday morning quarterback 2000 years later and see the sins of others in this text. But as my Hebrew Scripture teacher always told us, don’t assume the position of the good guys in the text. Put yourself in the place of those receiving the critique and then listen for the word of God. What is Jesus saying to us, to me? This story tells me that Jesus is angry at any religion that manipulates and uses its power to serve its own purpose. Jesus’ zeal was to keep the house of God from being used for the rich getting richer or used to exclude people so that God’s house would be a house of prayer for all people. Since the priests were the primary

culprits in this story, I believe Jesus would be angry if I did not work hard to put myself in the shoes of people for whom life has been hard and harsh.

He'd be angry if I exploited the poor in order to maintain my privileged position. Jesus holds those of us who profess his name to a high standard of accountability. I believe Jesus would be angry if I failed to do as he did: to feed the hungry, help the sick find healing, and give hope to the hopeless. I believe Jesus would be angry with any church if it were to place profit over people, if its offerings supported a country club of only friends rather than a faithful community that thinks outside itself. Jesus said, "blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God." I believe Jesus would be angry if I gave up too easily on making peace with my enemies or if I failed to participate in the healing of the nations.

I must admit that I prefer the compassionate Christ over the angry Jesus. Positive reinforcement is what works with me. When I was in college in the early 70s, studying to become a teacher, behavior modification was the "in" theory of classroom management. When I did my student teaching, there was a kindergarten boy who hit all the time. I talked with my college professor about how to handle the boy, and she said this: First, watch the boy for 20 minutes and put a slash mark down for each time he hits. Then carry in your pocket a carrot slice or piece of candy and every minute he goes without hitting, give him a reward and words of positive reinforcement. What worried me about this approach was the kid getting beaten up while I ignored the hitting and waited to give out a piece of candy. I think that Jesus preferred positive reinforcement, too, but that he also worried about the kid getting beaten up in the meantime. That's why Jesus forcefully told God's truth, clearly, articulately, and boldly. He models for us that there are things worth going to the mat over; things even worth dying for.

This story of Jesus "cleaning house" has a rather complicated prophetic message, but it can have deeply personal meanings as well. Today is the third Sunday in Lent, the halfway mark of this season of repentance and self-reflection. The word Lent, means "spring." So we do our spring cleaning, and we get rid of what is dirty or useless. Spring cleaning is not always easy work because it requires us to examine things we've had around for a long time, and ask ourselves if we still need it. Does it still have a purpose or is it cluttering up our lives? Have you held in your hand a knickknack that once had special meaning and pondered if it's time to relinquish what to anybody else looks like a piece of junk?

The four years between my full-time pastorate at Claremont and being called here was an extended time of "cleaning house." I went through just about everything -- except some of Tom's stuff. I did a lot of pondering about stuff I'd carried with me over the years. I threw away a lot, especially things that I wouldn't want others to have to deal with later on. I worked to simplify my life. The verse "where your treasure is there is your heart also" ran through my mind as I eliminated and prioritized. Spring cleaning serves as a way to get our outer lives in order so that our inner lives may find focus.

So Lent becomes a kind of spring cleaning for the soul, tilling the soil of our hearts, making space for seeds to sprout new life and new beauty, and living in the hope that the convicting words of the Christ may actually make it possible for us to walk into the light of Easter morning resurrected as new people.

The Children's Anthem sums it up nicely:
"Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free,
tis a gift to come down where we ought to be,
and when we find ourself in the place just right,
twill be in the valley of love and delight."