

House Cleaning

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year B

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 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. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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. - John 2:13-22

Jesus is angry.

But I don't need to tell you that.

Overtured tabletops are crashing to the ground. Fistfuls of airborne coins tinkle and clatter as they land far and wide. Jesus must have been roaring when he said: "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had come from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Passover every year during his childhood. He would have seen how the religious system worked ~ and did not work. Live animals were sold to pilgrims who came there to make various sacrifices prescribed in the Law of Moses. We can imagine inflated prices and the sellers' hype: '*Only the best for Yaweh ...*'

But first came the currency exchange - the money-changers. The Roman coins needed for everyday use back home were forbidden at the temple because of their idolatrous images of the emperor. *But don't worry! The moneychangers are here to guide you through the process.* And if you're a rural pilgrim here in the big city, there's a good chance they may try to prey on your naivete.

No wonder Jesus is angry. For so many years, he had seen the victimization and profiteering, and all of the accessory noise and confusion that crowded out genuine devotion there in that sacred place. Today's gospel may partly be show us the day that Jesus snapped.

But there's also more going on here. We should know, for instance, that this same story is told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. In all three of those gospels the story comes near the end, only a few days before Jesus is crucified. Those three accounts read like a final boiling-over point in the longstanding conflict between Jesus and the religions authorities.

Here in John the story comes very early, in Chapter two. Placed so early in the gospel, shapes our understanding of the very nature an mission of Jesus. He is signaling here that he intends to unabashedly go for the heart of all religion that is failing and predatory and insincere. To reinforce this meaning: Only John's version of the story includes the quote from Psalm 69: "*Zeal for your house will consume me.*" And only in John does Jesus ominously say,

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." This story is widely known as the cleansing of the temple. Perhaps we can now think of Jesus as the holy housecleaner.

The gospel writer's intentions here are amplified by looking at what follows and precedes the so-called cleansing of the temple. Immediately after comes a curious verse: "*When [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.*" But no signs are described other than the temple cleansing. The author may be referencing other miracle-signs that are not named. Or maybe he is telling us that they believed in part because Jesus confronted what needed to be confronted; he did not automatically endorse religious practice for the sake of religious practice; he became angry because of things that had no doubt made so many so angry for so long, but unlike so many, he took action to right what was wrong.

As or more interesting is what precedes today's reading: the Wedding at Cana. Jesus joined the celebration as a guest. But when the wine ran out, Jesus, pressured by his mother, did something about it. He changed water into the best wine anyone there had ever drunk.

The sequence here is of interest in part because Cana was a long, long way from Jerusalem, and these back-to-back stories at first seem to be far, far apart in tone and meaning. But then we remember that the water that became wine was poured and served from vessels used for rites of religious purification, and purification is arguably a main intention of Jesus at the Temple. He is not angry for anger's sake. He is illustrating his mission to purify, to better allow weak and wayward humans to find and respond to their living and redeeming God.

And this is where you and I come into the story and why this story comes along in the season of Lent. You and I are now the vessels. We are the temple – each of us alone and all together. And Lent is our season of purification, of cleansing. We say we will follow him all the way to the cross on Good Friday, and there we will share the Solemn Collects, ending with a final prayer, both far-reaching and personal: "*... let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made ...*"

The anger of Jesus arises in today's gospel scene because Jesus sees the chasm between all that the temple was meant to be and the travesty of what it has become. And during Lent in particular, he seems to turn this same eye on us. Imagine that Jesus has a beloved image of what each one of us was and is meant to be. He also sees the ways we have compromised ourselves by what we have done and left undone: our self-serving, our pretend religion, our rationalizations, our denial, and more. The cleansing of the temple was seen as a sign – in part a sign of what Jesus sees and aspires to in us. If ever we sense his anger, it may be because we have some house-cleaning to do. *Amen.*