

3rd Sunday in Lent – Year B – March 11, 2012 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

Based on John 2:13-22 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Cleanse the temple of your heart”

John records this event at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, placing it after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. Matthew puts this event at the end of Jesus’ ministry, during Holy Week, on Palm Sunday, six days before he died on the cross. The gospel writers did not always record events in chronological order. Either way, it does not affect our salvation whether Jesus performed this action twice or once. The main point is that the Holy Spirit found it important enough for us to know, and so we will study it and apply it to our hearts this morning.

Jesus picked the right time to do this – it was during the Passover. During this annual celebration Jews remembered and thanked God for rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. For the Passover, Jews traveled to Jerusalem. There were more people in Jerusalem than at any other time during the year. Faithful Jews traveled from all over the world to offer sacrifices to the LORD at the temple. Many of them did not have the luxury of bringing an animal from their own herds and flocks. In the book of Deuteronomy the LORD made a provision for an Israelite who had to travel a far distance. They could sell a piece of property or an animal so that they could purchase an animal for sacrifice in Jerusalem. In the outer court of the temple sacrificial animals were sold; cattle, sheep, goats, and doves. They provided a necessary and convenient service. According to the laws the LORD gave to Moses, the people were also required to pay the annual temple tax during Passover. This tax paid for maintenance on the temple property. In order to pay the required annual temple tax, an individual had to have the correct currency – just as when you travel to Germany you have to exchange your US dollars for Euros. In this outer court moneychangers sat at their tables. The moneychangers provided a necessary and convenient service.

But imagine the scene... after you ascend the long flight of stone stairs, pass through the large pillars, and up into the outer court... you hear the noise... the weighing of coins on scales, the moneychangers and foreigners haggling over the price of exchange, the lowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep and goats, the worshipers negotiating over the price of the animals, the smell of the animals... imagine all this in our narthex, as you prepare to walk into God’s house to worship.

Then we begin to understand - How could Jesus worship with all this defilement going on around him? He gathers pieces of rope or leather lying about in the temple court, tying them together and makes a whip, and begins to drive out the animals and the vendors. He overturns the tables of the moneychangers, scattering their coins all over the stone floor. Notice in this scene that Jesus does not set all of the doves free by kicking over their cages. He does not destroy their property so that they lose their means of income, but tells them, **“Get these out of here! Do not make my Father’s house a marketplace!”**

Some have incorrectly used this Scripture to condemn all forms of selling and buying in the church. Jesus never condemned them for selling and buying. All of this was a perfectly legitimate business. There is nothing wrong with the youth group or our Women of Faith group hosting a fundraising activity on the church property where all of proceeds are used to support the mission and vision of the congregation. There is a difference between church sales and the merchandizing in the Temple. The latter was used for personal gain and profit. The uncleanness of the temple was evident of what was inside their hearts. The temple was supposed to point to Christ, instead it was cluttered with greed and misplaced priorities. These people had defiled the house of God – not only the temple but their own hearts. This is what made Jesus so angry.

John records, **“His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”** Jesus had so much love and respect for the temple as a place where people could come and hear how much their Father loves them, that it became a consuming fire inside of him. When he saw this abomination in the temple and in their hearts, he couldn't stop. He couldn't help but purge the temple from all those things that would endanger the spiritual life of believers.

Are we as zealous to purge from our lives anything that would endanger our souls? Are we as on fire for the house of God that we would cleanse our hearts from anything that would defile his house? What cattle, sheep and goats do we allow to live in our hearts that might defile God's house? Are they not the attitudes that we bring with us into God's house?

How many of you have ever said, or heard it said, “Mom and dad or spouse make me come to church.” That certainly is a distraction that we bring upon ourselves when we come to church. How about this one, “Church is boring. The music isn't exciting. The pastor doesn't tell fun stories like they do in other churches.” We've missed the point of church then, haven't we? What about this one, “I can't help it that I sometimes dose off. I'm too tired on Sunday morning.” What's the attitude here - that church really isn't so important that I would make sure I get a decent night's sleep to be fresh and rested to come to God's house. How about this one, “I don't come to church because someone there offended me.” Isn't the purpose of church about your relationship with God? There seems to be a deeper problem with this excuse, an issue of not knowing God's love enough for yourself. When I understand God's love for me... that translates into love and forgiveness toward others.

What is the purpose of church? The Germans have given us a beautiful word for the church service: *Gottesdienst* – it means *God's service*. Worship is God's service to us. In worship he comes to us in Word and Sacrament to strengthen our trust in his promises. Here he feeds your soul. He increases your understanding of Scripture. He points us away from ourselves as the way to heaven and points us to Christ. At the same time *Gottesdienst* is: *the service of God*, our service to him. We respond to his Word with our songs, psalms and prayers.

If the preacher is boring or his message is fluff, the organist hasn't prepared, the choir and musicians are off, children are running in and out of church, the people sitting here are blinded by the sun... those things don't help. But these attitudes that we bring to church are like dragging in a herd of cattle that distract us from true worship. We've defiled God's house and we don't allow worship to be fulfilling or edifying.

What should Jesus do? He expects a home in our hearts that is pure and clean, not cluttered with junk and the stink of our sinful attitudes. In anger shouldn't he drive us away from his presence forever? In his righteous anger, shouldn't he destroy us for good? He ought to, because we deserve it. No, instead he cleanses our hearts and makes them pure, he sweeps them clean. He gives us a sign that he has done it.

The Jews asked Jesus, **“What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”** I'll give you a sign, **“Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.”** Their hearts were so cluttered with unbelief they didn't understand what he was talking about. “Destroy it,” he challenged them, and they would, three years later, at the same time of year, the Passover. They had destroyed the true worship of God in the temple, only to destroy another one – and they did by crucifying him. It is our sins, too, that nailed Jesus to the cross. But this was his plan, that our sins, taken by him, on him, in him, would cause God the Father to destroy his Son, and with him, all of our sins.

The greatest miraculous sign that he has given to the world, and to us, is that three days later, he raised that temple. With his body he came out of his tomb. By his physical resurrection he proclaimed to the world and to you and me that

his work was complete, that the Father was satisfied with his life and death. This was the sign that proved his authority to cleanse the temple: by his death and resurrection he had cleansed the world of their sins. His promise: those who believe and are baptized receive the cleansing of their sins.

Some people go to great lengths to cleanse their bodies of toxins – forcing themselves to eat a three day cleanse diet of fruit smoothies for breakfast, salads and grapefruit for lunch, and fish and broccoli for dinner. Others go the easy, but more expensive route, by purchasing a pre-bottled cleanse which they drink every day. But no amount of bottled cleansing agents can purge our hearts of sinfulness. This work must be done by the Holy Spirit.

When we gather for worship, the Holy Spirit drives from our hearts the sheep and goats of distraction by driving us to what is truly most important in our lives – Christ’s death and resurrection. Through His Word the Holy Spirit reassures us, **“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. He will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** (1John 1:9,10) Purified from sin, I am right with God, and fit for resurrection on the last day and fit for heaven.

The Holy Spirit also made a promise to you in Baptism, **“We were buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”** **(Romans 6:4)** Through baptism you are guaranteed that the trash of your heart has been washed clean. Through baptism God the Holy Spirit has created a new heart in you, a clean heart. This is how God has made you through Christ’s death and resurrection.

This is how we come to worship God, knowing who we are, baptized into Christ, our sins have died with Christ, we have been raised to new life with Christ. When I come to church I have the understanding that worship is God’s service to me - this is where he feeds me and walks with me. Then I will come to church ready to listen, eager to hear what my God has to say to me today. I come to church rejoicing that he has given me this opportunity to gather with other baptized believers. There will be distractions in church, but I will ignore them. And out of love for others here I will be mindful that I do not distract others from hearing the Word of God.

I will leave God’s house today rejoicing, with a heart full of thanksgiving that God has spoken to me today through his Word. I will go home, thankful that he has given me the opportunity to study his Word there. I will go home and by daily repenting of my sins I will purge from my heart all that would distract me from living for my God, so that Christ may dwell there through his Word.

Cleanse my heart, O Jesus, and live within me every day that I may live for you! Amen.