

Cleaning, Clearing and Changing
Exodus 20: 1-17 and John 2: 13-22
March 8, 2021...Third Sunday of Lent
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Little did we know on October 1, 2020 World Communion Day, we would do work that would make a disaster a little less of a disaster. Following the outdoor service, we came together with a plan. We came with masks, gloves, cleaning, and sanitizing products. We were armed with cloths and brooms. And we entered the building with joy in our hearts. It was cleaning day for the house of Lord. We did more than clean, though. As we do in our own homes, we cleared the clutter in the closets of all that stuff we might need one day. A good bit of that stuff was tucked away in cardboard boxes. That day we began the planned process of cleaning, organizing, and pitching. I would like to think it made Jesus smile.

Fast forward to Thursday, February 18, 2022 and the likes of ice and cold temperatures that Dallas, and all Texas, has not experienced in years. Broken pipes allowed water to run freely throughout most of the building, the amount estimated at about 8000 to 10000 gallons. This time people gathered for an unplanned cleaning and a spirit of determination amid an overwhelming picture where soggy cardboard boxes had melted into soggy messes, among a myriad of other messes. But not even the large industrial fans could drown out the repeated “thank yous” for all planned clearing and cleaning in October. The time and energy to wrangle the water out the doors could have much greater. I do believe that while Jesus was wading the waters with us, he was also smiling as he witnessed a community of faith coming together with hearts, hands, prayers, and encouragements.

A smiling, praying, preaching, teaching, healing, deep-in-thought Jesus is often the image that comes to mind, is it not? And yet, our divine and human Lord shares our emotions like happiness, joy, grief, frustration, impatience, and sometimes, downright anger.

It is the Jesus we least often picture that we see in today’s reading from John’s gospel. A bit of background that I think adds richness and food for thought about this story. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this story of Jesus lashing out is considered the last straw, the event that so angers the religious leaders, they are determined to arrest Jesus and have him killed. But curiously, John places the same story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. As with any story told the same or similar way, we can hear it with many different ears. Each week we asked the Holy Spirit to perk up our ears, open our hearts and widen our minds to hear what message we need to hear as individuals and as the body of Christ. But the same story can have many take-aways. And so, here is something to think about with John’s account, who like the other Biblical writers are less interested in historical information that gifting us with faith. And in this instance, our Lord’s statement of faith. These uncharacteristic actions of Jesus, I think are part anger, even though scripture does not name it that. But I also think that John might be telling us that Jesus is not only accepting who he is, but also what he must do. In this story, Jesus lays down the foundation of what is and what is not acceptable in the sight of God. If we dig under that anger, is this not a message about change, as Julia Robert’s similarly says in *Pretty Woman*: a big change; a big, big change; a huge change!

It goes beyond conducting temple business in a new way. Jesus’ actions are revealing the non-negotiable change of heart about how people are to be in relationship with one another in ways that make God smile. Jesus may have been having a dramatic moment, but he was setting the stage for all the moments to come. And for John’s gospel, the physical stage was the temple.

Jesus is gathering in Jerusalem as he has done since he was a child. He joins with the other Diaspora Jews, God’s faithful people, who have been scattered away from Jerusalem. For many this is a bittersweet journey. They come to remember a time of slavery and rejoice in a newfound freedom. Little do they know that an even greater freedom, in the forgiving grace of Jesus, awaits the world.

The temple courtyards are packed. Everywhere people and animals and stuff, but not everyone who has made the journey will be allowed to worship and give thanks. The sacrifice of pure animals and the paying of a temple tax were non-negotiables, at least according to human must-dos. Some families would purchase a lamb for a buck, only to discover that by the journey end in Jerusalem, someone tells them the lamb is not pure enough. Do not worship or pay ten bucks for a pure animal. End of story. Robbers and thieves, Jesus called them.

The situations with the overpriced lambs and dove and the temple tax paid to the Roman treasury were made more troubling with the mandate all purchases and donations had to be made with the local currency, the shekel. On those shekels were a stamped human image. What are weary travelers are carrying in their hearts is God's commandment that says, "You shall have no idols." Pay to Caesar, or do not worship! End of story! The human story, but not God's story. Change was about to whip through the temple like a mighty, loud rushing wind.

Jesus did not like the clutter scattered throughout the multiple courtyards: the tables, the coins, the animals, the marketers. Those were the easier things to clean and clear. Toss the tables. Let the coins fly. Unleash the animals. But something far deeper, we know, is stirring in Jesus. Could it be that Jesus knows the only way to bring about a change of heart so monumental that people change what they are doing is to call upon the power, the authority and strength of God for that message to be heard. Jesus needed them to know that he and they were to be about business in God's house, not theirs. That just might take a loud word and fierce look. Jesus sees all this with new eyes because he knows now is the time, he knows what God intends for him and for the world.

This is a story for all time, and as followers of Jesus, we are called to stand with him as he is standing for all who seek to keep down the downtrodden, to push back the poor, to take advantage of those who will never have enough to be entertained as the holy people of God. I understand why Jesus is not smiling! Jesus even tells us what has aroused anger in him. The temple practices go deeper than putting down people, all people. God's house, the place intended to be a house of prayer, has become a marketplace where the advantaged have power over the disadvantaged. All Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and acting out point to God's love for all humanity. And yet, here, in God's house, not all are welcomed, not all are treated the same. The dirtiness of the human heart has set up shop, created an either "you are in or you are out less-than holy club, and it is now time for Jesus to do some cleaning, clearing, and changing.

Jesus' anger is not just a story of the past. It is our story, too. Above all, it is forever God's story. Reaching across the ages, what would Jesus see and hear entering the churches of our time? Would he feel the need to do some house cleaning and clearing? And going deeper, what does Jesus see and hear from our own hearts. Am I in need of some minor or monumental changing of my heart to remind me God's house is a house of prayer for all people?

Just as God and God's house stood for all humanity, not just Israel, we, and Christ's churches, for all time, must stand with and for all humanity, not just our communities of faith. Jesus' outward anger comes because of this inward focus. Jesus is reminding all Christians that we cannot let our churches turn inward, live only for self, exist just because we have a building. He is telling us that we cannot rob others by setting standards for those who fit in and those who do not. We are church because we have a living story to share that in God's eyes all people matter, and based on that alone, they should matter to us. And when we reach that point, our Triune God will indeed be smiling down on us! Amen