

The Third Sunday in Lent • March 11, 2012

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 2:13-22

“A Savior Who Serves: Cleansing”

Growing up, we shared our home with a dog that was very much a part of our family. If you care for a dog, you know that there's a lot that comes along with that. Feeding them, exercising them, cleaning up after them, and – not something easily forgotten once you've done it – washing them. Some dogs love to take a bath. They jump right in to the tub or wag their tails enthusiastically waiting for you to bring the garden hose over and get started. They might even sit there long enough for you to cover them in suds and rinse all the dirt from their fur. Our dog wasn't thrilled by bath time, but she submitted to it all the same. (If it's possible for canines to have a begrudging expression, our dog had mastered it.) After a bath, though, she took on an entirely different attitude, gleefully tearing around the house, racing around like a puppy running down a favorite rubber ball. It was as if she'd been made into a brand new dog.

Have you ever tried to wash a cat? They're not thrilled by the prospect of a bath, should one ever be required. I would not want to attempt a feat like that unless I had tranquilizers or body armor – maybe both. There will probably be hissing, scratching, and wrestling involved in trying to get the cat into the tub or sink, with more to follow if you're trying to get out a particularly stubborn stain or clump of debris. And after it's all over, you're left with an altogether different expression: the glare. Those feline eyes stab at you accusingly and seem to cry out, “You! You did this to me! You'll get yours, just you wait.”

There aren't any dogs or cats in today's reading from John's Gospel account of Jesus cleansing the temple. We see other animals, though: oxen, sheep, and pigeons, animals that would be used for sacrifices that pilgrims would offer according to the ancient Levitical code. As the great festival of Passover drew near, faithful Jews from all over came to Jerusalem to worship at the temple and make their sacrifices to God. The vendors that set up shop in the temple offered visitors the convenience of being able to buy their sacrificial animals on-site, rather than having to bring livestock with them on a lengthy journey from afar. They were meeting a perceived need. The money-changers likewise offered services to pilgrims, setting up their tables in the month leading up to Passover. In this time, every devout Jewish male twenty years of age or older would pay the temple tax. Travelers had to have their money exchanged into silver Jewish coins without human images on them. These conveniently-located bankers also happened to charge a very high exchange fee. Things aren't much different today, are they? If you're traveling to a tourist destination, “convenient” vendors will offer sundries that you either forgot to bring with you or didn't want to cram in your limited luggage space. You'll probably pay a premium for fuel at the gas station near the airport's rental car return. You might not like it, but you understand how it is. The biggest problem here, though, is that these vendors and money-changers have set up shop in the outer court of the temple – especially at the time of Passover.

Imagine that the temple complex looks like a set of rectangles, one inside another. The largest of those, the outermost court, was the Court of the Gentiles. That's where Gentile converts to the faith and non-purified Jews would worship. A low wall or railing known as the *soreg* marked the inner boundary for such people, and they were not permitted to enter in any closer into the temple, under pain of death. Think about what it'd be like to come to worship, only to have a noisy marketplace sitting in the back of the sanctuary – the clink of the coins, the flutter and cooing of pigeons, the sounds of the sheep and oxen and all those people doing business. **The vendors and money-changers were disrupting the worship of those non-Jews who had come to the temple – getting in the way of the purpose for which the temple existed!** But then Jesus entered the scene and took action.

If you have thought of Jesus as a laid-back surfer-dude type of philosophical teacher, take a good look at this Jesus! He drives out all the livestock with an improvised whip. He overturns the tables of those “convenient” vendors who are intruding into and disrespecting the sacredness of God's house and the worship that would take place there. **Jesus cleanses the temple court of the disruptive clutter that had come into it.** And he wants to do that with your life, too.

How much clutter is disrupting your life? Specifically, how are distractions and diversions obstructing your time with God, here in worship? Do you find it hard to just *be*, rather than thinking of what you need to get done today or in the week ahead? Are you juggling schedules to get your family here and there, just checking in while being checked out? **When you're in worship, are your heart and your mind here, or just your body?** You and I have at times allowed distractions to encroach farther and farther into our time spent with God. And just like the vendors and money-changers in the Court of the Gentiles, those distractions clutter up our hearts and minds and keep us from just being with our Lord.

Jesus has come as a Savior who serves in cleansing. His disciples remembered the words of Psalm 69, "Zeal for your house will consume me." That zeal for his Father's house did consume Jesus, and not just in this cleansing of the temple. There, Jesus demonstrated his concern for the people who had come to worship God, even those outsider Gentiles. His fervor and enthusiasm for caring for people who longed for pure worship – a right relationship with God, personal interaction with their Creator – is what led the Son of God to go to the cross. **He came to drive out the clutter and clamor of sin from our lives, even when you and I would resist.**

Jesus comes to cleanse; however, you and I might be more panicked by that cleansing than a cat about to get a bath. We scratch and hiss, stubbornly resisting the removal of disruptive clutter, even when it's in our best interest. We have a hard enough time moving our clocks ahead one hour each spring! **Who is this Jesus, anyway, that he would come and make changes to how I live my life?** What gives him the right?

The temple authorities and leaders of the people ask Jesus that same question. They don't show any concern as to whether or not Jesus' cleansing of the temple was the right thing to do. They ask for a sign to show how he would be justified in taking such actions. The sign that he gave them is the same that he gives us: he would rise from death, because it could not hold him down. He is God's Son, the Savior. **He came to bring cleansing so that people could have pure worship, interaction with God.** That personal interaction would no longer be tied to the temple in Jerusalem; instead, God now interacts with His people through Christ. Consider that: Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple's purpose. Neither Jews nor Gentiles need offer God any sacrifices of oxen or sheep or pigeons, for Jesus gave himself as the ultimate sacrifice to bring about the cleansing of each soul from the clutter and clamor of sin.

Jesus is here to bring cleansing to you today. He might be overturning tables to which you've long become accustomed, but he will not harm you. He is here to break down the barriers that keep you and me from living in that restored relationship with God where no dividers keep us away from Him, where we no longer have to stay out on the outermost edges. When we get to live like that through Jesus, our Savior who serves, life takes on a renewed joy.

You might not go tearing around your house like a pupping chasing a rubber ball, but **the cleansing that Jesus brings makes you new all the same.** In these forty days of Lent, cast out clutter. Spend time with your Lord apart from noise and distraction. This week, consider the words of David from Psalm 19 that God's instruction is to be more desired than gold, and sweeter than honey from the honeycomb. Enjoy that time with your Creator as He strengthens you for life and gives you the opportunity for pure worship.

May we all pray with David, as people who live under Jesus, a Savior who serves, cleansing us and casting out clutter and clamor, *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer."*

Amen.