

“John: Cleaning House”

Jeremiah 7:1-11 • John 2:13-25

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 2, 2022

Most of you know that I had the privilege of earning my Master’s degree from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. While I was there it was a great seminary with some of the best professors in the world. In fact, three of them went on to become seminary presidents at other schools. Sadly they no longer offer the kind of education I received. One of the things I really liked about the seminary is that it has so much history. It’s the oldest Presbyterian seminary in the country. As a result there have been a number of distinguished graduates, including R.C. Sproul and Mister Rogers. One fun fact is that the two of them actually attended the seminary together for a short time, even though Fred Rogers was a decade older than Sproul.

The reason I mention this is because I want you to think for a moment about what you imagine Jesus was like. Because the bible describes him as gentle, kind, and humble, which he certainly was all of those, the image many people get is that Jesus was kind of like Mister Rogers. We forget that Jesus was also bold and showed righteous anger about things that offend God. That’s what we find in today’s reading from the Gospel of John.

Last week we heard how Jesus quietly turned water into wine in order to save the wedding of family friends. He didn’t want to make a scene. But his disciples and a few other people knew what happened and the result, according to verse 11 of chapter 2 is that his disciples believed in him.

Now, in this next section, Jesus apparently wants to make a scene. He and his disciples have traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Everyone was expected to make the trip to celebrate the festival and so Jerusalem is extremely crowded. The city normally had a population of maybe 40,000 people. But during Passover there were as many as 250,000 there. That’s six times the normal population. Here’s

an example to help us understand what that may have been like. You know how bad the traffic gets going out to the beach on holidays like Memorial Day weekend with a few thousand visitors in town. Imagine if there were more like 1.5 million extra people in our city for a holiday.

The reason all those people came to Jerusalem was to worship in the Temple. Every family was to offer a sacrifice – usually a lamb, but if they couldn’t afford a lamb they could offer two doves. They were also required to pay the annual Temple tax. Both of those had to be perfect. The animal had to be without blemish and the coin for the Temple tax had to be pure silver. One of the jobs of the priests was to decide whether the animals presented were good enough.

As a service to help those who were traveling, the Temple leadership began selling animals that were already “certified” as being acceptable for the sacrifice. This was not necessarily a bad thing, except that it provided an opportunity to take advantage of people. Kind of like buying a soda at the ballpark or amusement park, the price for these animals was much higher than anywhere else, as much as 5 times the normal price. To make things worse, they were selling these animals *inside* the Temple complex. Around the temple itself were a number of different courts and the outermost court, surrounding the whole temple complex, was called the Court of the Gentiles. Entrance to the inner courts was restricted to certain classes of people but anyone could enter the Court of the Gentiles and that’s where most people went to worship. Only now the noise would have been deafening with all the animals and the merchants bartering and thousands of people moving around.

When Jesus comes he becomes very upset. The place that was intended for people to be in

the presence of God has basically been turned into a flea market. So he does something about it. Jesus makes a whip of cords and drives out the vendors and all the animals. He turns over the tables of the money changers. None of this sounds like something Mister Rogers would do, so what is going on? Well basically there are two things happening. One is that Jesus is trying to return the Temple to a place to worship God. He is trying to remove the things that are getting in the way of people worshipping.

The other thing that's going on is that Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. Malachi chapter 3, near the very end of the Old Testament, says, "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi (that would be the Temple priests) and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years."

Jesus is the perfect prophet. He fulfills the role of prophet so perfectly that there is never again a need for a human prophet. The role of the prophet was to call people back to God, to worship. Jesus, as God in person, calls all of us back to worship God, which was the purpose of the Temple. But Jesus does something else, too. He replaces the Temple. The Temple leadership comes and asks Jesus what authority he thinks he has to disrupt their business. They actually demand a sign, literally a miracle. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." But he's not talking about the building in Jerusalem. That was in fact destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans and never rebuilt. Jesus is talking about his

crucifixion and resurrection. His body is the true Temple.

Richard Phillips writes, "whereas the temple was the place where God symbolically dwelt, Jesus is the person in whom God truly dwelt in the flesh." Colossians 1 says that Jesus is fully God in the flesh. Phillips goes on to point out that the most important function of the temple was to house the ark of the covenant. On the Day of Atonement the priest took the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled it on the mercy seat for forgiveness. The death of Jesus on the cross now serves as the place where sin is forgiven and where we are received into God's grace.

The Bible goes so far as to say that if we are united with Christ, *we* are the temple. The church is called the "body of Christ," and Paul says that individually we are the temple. In 1 Corinthians 3 he writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" The problem is that most of us have cluttered the temple just as much as the day Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. Your life is busy and noisy. You are concerned about buying and selling and investing. How do I know? Because I'm guilty of it, too. Our lives are not places of quiet reverence and passionate worship. And Jesus wants to drive that out of us, too. He will come and clear his temple within us.

So what do we do? How do we make our lives a place where we can meet with God? It's simple and it's hard. It's simple because you need to do the same kinds of things that Christians have found helpful for centuries. These are the things that are called "spiritual disciplines." Things like spending time alone with God in silence, reading and meditating on the Scriptures, praying, giving, and serving other people. The best way to practice those things consistently is to meet regularly with a few other believers so you can encourage one another and hold each other accountable.

Jesus cleared the temple in Jerusalem because he loved the people too much to let

them clutter it up. He loves you too much to let you clutter up your worship and he will come and clear those things from your life. His whip is not brutal. It's made of cords instead of leather. He loves us enough to quietly work a miracle to save a wedding and he loves us enough to loudly purify his church. Let's love him enough to respond with faith.

Amen.