

Have you done your spring cleaning yet? A friendly neighbor left a note on my door this last week, bringing to my attention the leaves winter left on my lawn and the grass that shot up with the recent warmth, politely asking me to tidy up my yard a bit. So I’ll be doing some spring cleaning this afternoon.

How about you? Maybe like me you’ve been saving some of the outdoor work for warmer weather – now’s the time, before it gets too warm. Spring’s traditionally the time for indoor cleaning, too – in the days before the vacuum cleaner, people could open their windows again and get all the dust out that collected over the winter months.

You could say that in our gospel lesson Jesus does a spring cleaning of sorts. It was Passover, and Passover was in spring – around April. But what Jesus is cleaning – or cleansing – isn’t his home or his yard. It’s God’s house, and the hearts of the worshippers gathered there. And it surprises us at first. This Jesus is neither friendly nor polite. This Jesus is full of righteous anger and zeal for his Father’s house and what goes on there. And since Jesus hasn’t changed, it raises the question, doesn’t it? If Jesus visited this house of worship and these hearts in worship, would he find need for a cleansing, too?

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”^[c] ¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” ²⁰ They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Passover is that festival that commemorated how God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. How, in the tenth plague – the killing of the firstborn – God spared Israel’s firstborn with the blood of a sacrificial lamb painted on their doorframes. It was also one of the three festivals God required his people to attend in Jerusalem. So tens of thousands of Jews and believing Gentiles from all over the Roman empire flooded the city. One of them is Jesus.

Can you picture it in your mind’s eye? He climbs the temple mount with throngs of other worshippers, and steps into the courtyard surrounding the temple. Can you imagine the sights, sounds, and smells that greet him there? Flocks of worshippers, but also animals – cows mooing, sheep bleating, doves flapping in their cages. Salesmen walking their wares past worshippers,

haggling with them over the price. Men sit at tables surrounding the court, clinking their coins and calling for business.

This was the called the courtyard of the Gentiles. But don't think it was like the parking lot outside of our church. For them, this courtyard *was* church. It was where they came and worshipped God. Can you imagine trying to worship in an environment like that? If we had a sheep-pen up here, cows walking down the aisle, and a guy trying to sell them, think you could pay attention?

So, how did this happen? Well, God required people to bring animal sacrifices to his house. And if you're a Jew traveling from a long distance, it doesn't make sense to bring an animal – it makes sense to buy one. So you need people selling animals. And Passover's a good time to pay the temple tax God also required. And since you can only pay it in Jewish currency, you'll need a moneychanger to swap out your Roman coins.

But *there?* In *church?* Why would the spiritual leaders allow this zoo in God's house, where people were worshipping? And there we get to the heart of the problem: They forgot what the point of worship was. You know, if you had asked the Jewish leaders if they were zealous for God's house, they'd have sworn they were. They loved their beautiful temple. Zealous that Israelites be present at the right time, have the right coinage, right sacrifices for worship.

But those good things had become more important than the main thing. That's not what worship is all about. Not the building, but the God who dwelled there to meet his people's needs with his mercy. Not rote and ritual, but hearts of repentance and faith. Not bringing the right sacrifices, but God's message through them of sin and forgiveness. Especially at Passover, pondering God's saving love in the past and the Savior he promised in the future. How could people meditate on that there when God's house had become a barnyard bazaar?

But when the main thing stops being the main thing, how quickly it gets sacrificed for the sake of convenience. "Why make people carry their lamb all those steps? Room in the courtyard; set up shop there."

Jesus bends down, gathers ropes used to tie animals, makes a whip, and starts driving out animals and sellers alike, flipping tables and scattering coins: **Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!** And at first it surprises us, but it's completely in character for Jesus. The Son steps into his Father's house and the main point, God's saving love, was getting lost in the clutter. And there's nothing Jesus is more zealous about than that people get that main point. So he cleans out the clutter.

Friends, I think it's easy to misunderstand this lesson. We can think it's all about selling things in church – Jesus doesn't like that. We think, "We don't do that, so we're good to go!" And so we can get right behind Jesus, cheering him on, "You show 'em, Jesus!" But then we'll leave worse off than we came today. No, the root problem runs deeper than that: It's letting good things become more important than the main thing. Losing sight of the main point of what goes on here.

I wonder if Jesus would find that if he sat in our leadership meetings. A church budget is a good thing, but does it happen sometimes that it becomes more important than the main thing? That in the important quest to meet the bottom line, we lose sight of the all-important task of sharing God's saving love with souls?

I wonder if Jesus would find that in our hearts if he sat in on our worship. Beautiful music is a good thing! But if that's more important to us than the message the music contains? A catchy and captivating sermon is a good thing! But if we're more concerned about that than we are the content? Couldn't Jesus accuse us of making his father's house into a house of entertainment?

The rote and ritual of our liturgy is a good thing. But when it leads us to stop paying attention to the words... When worship becomes just that – rote and ritual... When it's more about giving God what he wants, an hour or so of our time, our praises, our offering, and we can check it off the list for the week...done our duty...then we've lost sight of the main thing amidst the clutter.

And when the main thing isn't the main thing, it so easily gets sacrificed for the sake of convenience, or comfort, or anything else...and hasn't that described our attitude toward and attendance in worship before?

It's not comfortable, is it? When Jesus takes the whip and starts cleansing our hearts. Driving out the misplaced priorities, clearing the clutter there. But don't forget what drives him: Zeal. Burning love - not just for his Father's house. No, it's burning love for the people who gather here. Burning love for you and for me. He loves us enough to clear out the clutter so we never lose the main thing: Him!

Did you notice how Jesus expressed that he's the main thing? Jewish authorities are quick on the scene. Instead of being convicted, they're convicting: **What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?** And Jesus says, **"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days."** Only the temple he's talking about is his body. Do you see what Jesus did? The temple was where God dwelled among his people to meet their greatest need – sin – with forgiveness. Jesus says, "I'm the real temple! I am God, dwelling in human flesh among sinners to meet their greatest need – sin – with forgiveness."

And he has. Love led Jesus to cleanse the temple that day. Greater love led him to the cross. There, just like Jesus promised, they destroyed the temple of Jesus' body - he breathed his last. But there the greater cleansing took place. Because his death met your greatest need. Forgiveness, for all the misplaced priorities, for all the clutter...forgiveness for all your sins. He's the real Passover Lamb, whose shed blood saves you from eternal death. He's the end to all animal sacrifices, because his one sacrifice has washed you clean and made you holy in God's sight. He raised the body they destroyed on day three, just like he promised, to prove to you that it's so.

But he also raised that temple so that he could be here in this temple with you this morning. Zeal for this house still consumes him. Really, there's no place he'd rather be than here, in his Father's house, meeting your greatest need with his forgiveness. Coming to you in his Word, so you can ponder what his saving love has done for you in the past and what it will do for you in the future. In his supper, so you can taste his saving love for you in the present.

As we meet him here, let's share Jesus' zeal. Let's keep him as the main thing. So worship is not about building, but what happens here; not just about what we do here, but more importantly about what Jesus does here for us here. So that we find the hymns' beauty not so much in the music as in the Savior they sing of; so we listen not for catchiness in sermons, but content – sin and grace. So we pay attention as the liturgy leads us to ponder anew our greatest need and God's mercy in meeting it in Christ. Let's keep out the clutter, so our time in God's house is all about Jesus. Amen.