

Clean Heart

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from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church Champaign
March 4, 2018/Third Sunday of Lent

Psalm 51; 10-12; John 2:13-22

We find Jesus in our passage today cleaning house.

He cleaned the whole house. He drove the money-changers out of the temple: the money-changers, their money, and their tables. Out. He went to the trouble of making a whip of cords and he drove out not only the money-changers, but the cattle. Yes, there were cattle. He drove out the cattle. He drove out the sheep. He drove out the doves.

You've come for the family reunion called the Passover. All your friends are there. Distant cousins. Neighbors. Childhood friends you haven't seen in ages. They're all there. Historian Josephus estimated that as many 2,700,000 Jews attended this family reunion. That's a big, big number.

They came from far away. They came from different cultures. They sported different clothing, different smells, different tastes. And they couldn't bring animals of sacrifice with them; it was hard enough for heads of households to get their human families there, much less caged animals appropriate for sacrifice. That's why there were animals at the temple. Animals were an ancient, respected, and necessary part of the rituals of sacrifice. So, that's why cattle were there, and sheep, and doves.

And, naturally, there had to be money-changers. Roman coins with the image of a human on them couldn't be used to buy holy, unblemished animals. No, of course not. You needed proper coinage to buy these holy animals. So, you needed money-changers.

People from far and wide had come to celebrate the Festival of the Passover. And here on the temple steps is this Jesus making a commotion. What is he doing?

He's cleaning house.

Jesus was saying that the rituals of the day had run God right out of the equation. Jesus was saying, *It's not about doves and sheep, It's about the state of your heart.* It's not a marketplace. It's a temple. Be reverent. Come in on your knees.¹

The Psalmist's ancient words echo what Jesus is doing here: "Create in me a clean heart, O LORD." Indeed, *The most important thing on the altar in that temple is your own heart.*

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Does this old, old story in John's Gospel still resonate? Does it still speak? Is there a word for us, even us, even now?

Do we need to clean the house of our heart? Are there things amiss? Is there a hardness of heart that we need to work on? A grudge? A failure to connect what we think and feel with how we live and what we do?

Do we need to clean the house of our church? Churches that spend all of their time polishing their dinner plates but who no longer feed the hungry have somewhere along the line ceased to be the church. Every church should ask: are there ministries we do now that once were needed and were faithful, but now have become mere busywork? Where might we need to clean house?

What about our nation? School children are walking out of classes in protest because they're tired of being shot at; they think gun safety laws need to change and they need to change now, right now. Before another Parkland High is splashed across the headlines. Where might we, as a nation, need to clean house?

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By way of explaining why he cleaned house at the temple, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He was talking about his own body, of course. And he was identifying himself as the son of the very God whom so many had set out to celebrate and worship at Passover. Jesus had come to show the way to a people who had become lost: Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, the near and the far. They had lost sight of what was at the center of God's intention for human life. Offering up unblemished lambs and doves in pure sacrifice doesn't compare to simply loving God and neighbor in word and deed, with your whole heart.

Whenever our focus becomes cluttered—and it *does* from time to time—may Jesus come again and clean out the house that is our hearts, may he turn over the tables, wake us up, whip out the distractions, shatter and dust away the ritual that has lost meaning.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
AMEN.*

Gospel: JOHN 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Psalm: 51: 10-12 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right^[b] spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing^[c] spirit.

¹ One commentator says this: "Jesus challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God, a temptation that exists for contemporary Christianity as well as for the Judaism of Jesus' day" (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol IX p. 547).