A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

***“The Cleansing of the Temple”***

John 2:13-22

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The cleansing of the temple is one of the most compelling stories in the gospels, Jesus swaggers into the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem, the holiest place in Israel, at the Passover time: one of the highest, holiest times in the year. The temple courtyard would have been packed. In this moment, at this place, Jesus wreaks havoc. Making and then swinging some sort of whip of cords, he drives out the animals that were there to be sold to pilgrims to make their sacrifices, he grabs the money changers money and pours their denariuses and shekels out on the ground, and then, in a final flourish turns over their tables. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my father’s house a house of trade!”

This story, along with the feeding of the 5000, and the crucifixion are just about the only stories that are in all four gospels. And no wonder this is one of them. We’re drawn to this story like drivers creeping along past the tangled mess of a fresh car accident. Peace-preaching, long-suffering Jesus finally let ‘em have it, giving ‘em what they deserve, restoring sanity and righteousness to a system corrupted by encroaching greed, opportunism, and all manner of distraction from prayer and worship that you can only imagine if you can imagine a farmer’s market meets zoo, meets stock market floor, meets old world bazaar.

We’re willing to accept Jesus willingly enduring suffering on the cross, and that suffering is, we know, the call of discipleship. We know that, and remember that the way of Jesus is a crown of thorns and a cross and the way of peace and self-sacrifice and inexhaustible love for friend and enemy. Turning the other cheek gets tiresome.

Truth be told, just between us, this is the Jesus we identify with . . .or would like to. A 1st century superhero, an Avenger in long white robes, standing up for justice and the little man. There’s something satisfying about this story, the true super-man swinging around that whip. It’s what we’d like to do to (I’d better speak for myself here, you may have your own list) . . . I’ve got a list: it’s what I’d like to do one by one to every one of the 22 predatory payday lending stores in this city and their 500% annual interest rates, to the title loan companies and their repossessed vehicles. Go get ‘em Jesus, and then take it to the gilded studios of the huckster preachers on television, selling the gospel and their souls for dollars; then take that whip of cords to the politicians who build bridges to nowhere and missiles for no reason but to have money poured into their pockets; take it to a health care system that lines the pockets of . . .who knows who . . .but someone, while hurt people go bankrupt trying to pay the ambulance bill.

Take it to all those fathers, wherever they are, who abandon their children and their children’s mammas. Take it the dungeons of those perverts who run websites exploiting women and children; then take it to those caves in the desert where those self-absorbed, delusional self-congratulatory false-religious radicals spew and unleash their evil on the victims of their insolence and hatred. That was just some of my list. You probably have your own.

Let there be a righteous whip of cords and swing it, driving out, driving away, all of those who corrupt what is good and right and beautiful and true. The world is your temple, O God; let’s cleanse it. Cleanse it of all that takes your name in vain; that takes what is evil and calls it good, that takes what is wrong and calls it right, all that defames sacred space and devalues sacred people. This is a Jesus I can get behind. There’s something very satisfying about other people getting what they deserve and what’s coming to them. A reckoning.

But here’s the question for each of us greedily eyeballing that whip and imagining taking it to everyone else. There’s no way around it: are you on your own list? Are you first on your own list of that which needs to be cleansed? Both the gospel of John and the season of Lent bring the question and the cleansing home.

With all the enthusiasm for setting the world to rights, we’re always reminded: before you take the speck from your brother’s eye, remove the log from your own. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Let the ones who would drive out the corruption in everyone else first drive out their own bulls, sheep, doves, and moneychangers from their own hearts. The psalmist prays in confession and hope: “create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.” It always comes back to here, in me.

A cleansing is needed, for sure. And Jesus is just the one to bring it. In here. In me. As we’ve noted, unusually, this story is in all four gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this story is at the end. It is Jesus’ last public act in his ministry as if it’s the culmination of his preaching and teaching to restore the covenant with the one true God that had been buried under centuries of corruption and distraction.

And it’s the straw that breaks the back of the patience of the religious and political leaders, all those who had a stake in the status quo. In the other gospels, this is the last act. Distinctively, in John’s gospel, it is the first public act in Jesus’ ministry.

It has been suggested that perhaps Jesus did this twice, or more than twice and that’s why it’s at the beginning of John but at the end of the other gospels, but it’s more likely that John puts it here at first on purpose. John is less interested in chronology than in the theology of who Jesus is. He’s telling a story, intentionally, that we may believe in him.

Someone at lectionary breakfast reminded us that movies often do this in their storytelling. The movie opens with a scene from the end of the story, but placed at the opening to guide the reflection of the viewers and tell something important about the shape of the story. That’s a helpful way to see this story in John.

At the beginning of the gospel, just after the disciples are called in chapter one, there are three stories of transformation: water to wine, cleansing of the temple and a prophesy of its destruction and restoration in 3 days, and you must be born again.

The temple cleansing story’s location here at the beginning is enough to invite us to ask what it means for disciples of Jesus, for us. Water turning into wine is an image of transformation in Christ, and being born again is an image of transformation in Christ, and so is a temple being cleansed an image of transformation in Christ.

For many of us, it rings truest of all three of these images in the early part of John’s gospel. Renewal isn’t always pleasant. The psalmist: “Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow, let me hear joy and gladness, let the bones that you have broken rejoice.” Jesus, drive out my bulls, my sheep, my birds, my moneychangers. Cleanse me. I need you. I want you to turn me from water to wine, I want you to give me new life; I want you to come and make me holy again. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

It is the person who catches a glance at God’s character who longs for an inner renewal. Make me holy as you are holy. We come to know we are sinners in need of cleaning not first by seeing how corrupted we are but by seeing just how holy God is and then seeing ourselves in new light.

In an extraordinary passage, St. Augustine, in *Confessions*, asks, “Who are you my God?” He then draws deep from the well of mystery of the attributes of God, “Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old . . .always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking; you love without burning, you are jealous in a way free of anxiety, you repent without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil. You will a change without any change in your design. You recover what you find, yet have never lost. Never in any need, you rejoice in your gains. You are never avaricious, yet you require interest. We pay you more than you require so as to make you our debtor; yet who has anything which does not belong to you? You pay off debts, though owning nothing to anyone; you cancel debts and incur no loss. But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? (*Confessions*, 5)

Seeing himself in the light of this God, Augustine confesses, “The house of my soul is too small for you to come to it. May it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins; restore it. It is offensive, cleanse it.”

Is this not our Lenten confession: my house, my temple needs some work. O God, I am yours, do your work in me. It’s not just light dusting; it’s not just redecorating.

There’s a TV show on nowadays that hits pretty close to home for us here. Fixer Upper. Maybe you’ve heard of it. Have you thought of the spiritual metaphor? John 2 does. Take the worst abode and transform it. Take it like it is, then tear it up even more, and then build it back up. It is the spirit behind tear down the temple, I will raise it up in three days.

When you see an old house in ruins, it’s like seeing a sad soul in mourning, waiting for renewal. Then when that same house is gutted, as painful as it may be to the soul of the house, the house welcomes the sledgehammer and the jackhammer. And then when she is brought back, it’s like she’s brought back to life. Be happy for the new homeowners. Be glad for the soul of the house. Destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days. To raise is the same word for ‘to awaken’ and ‘arise’. And so, just as Jesus pledged to raise the destroyed temple in three days, the disciples raise him from sleep when they are tossed in a storm at sea, “Lord save us, we perish.” And when the disciples were on the mount of transfiguration, cowing in fear, Jesus came and touched them and said, “Arise and be not afraid.” Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb, and he himself was risen from the dead. It’s all the same word.

This house needs some work, O God. Needs your work. This soul needs an awakening, an arising. Cleanse this house or tear it down and raise it up again.

As you drove out the **bulls** of sacrifice from the temple, so drive out from my heart my own sacred cows, all of those idols around which I am tempted to dance and pledge my allegiance, and devote the place of lordship in my life. Everything that is not you, O God, may it be far from that which is crowned in my heart.

As you drove the **sheep** from the temple, so drive my disordered love for all that I possess and feel the need to control. Set me loose from holding on too tightly to the things I feel I must shepherd and trust you as the good shepherd of us all. Let me hold all things lightly, and be held in your hand, led to the green pastures and the still waters by you, and supported by your staff through the dark valleys of life.

As you drove the **birds** from the temple, so drive away all the squawking, chirping distractions that take my mind and attention from you and my neighbor. And drive out my own squawking and complaining, my whining and worrying about tomorrow. May I turn my eyes and ears from all that occupies my hours and days that is not to your praise, that I may be more fully yours in body, mind, and spirit and rest in you.

As you drove the **moneychangers**, so drive out of me all the ways I give to Caesar what is God’s, and all the ways I let encroach into the temple of my spirit those things which occupy my attention. Let there be a place of peace and quiet rest in my soul.

There are just sometimes when we can only pray: Turn these **tables**. Tear this temple down. Gut it. Raze it to the ground. Whatever it takes, my God, . . .that the world may be, that the church may be, that I may be transformed, reborn, rebuilt in your image, and may arise, stone by living stone, as our Father’s house.

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