

“My Father’s House”
John 2:13-22
Sunday, March 4, 2018
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Different things make different people angry, don’t they?

Theologian Martin Marty once said that you can divide religious people into two groups. Not the liberal and the conservative, not the Catholics and the Protestants, but the mean and the non-mean. Too true. Hits a bit too close to home, perhaps.

Will Rogers once said: “People who fly into a rage always make a bad landing.”

Here’s another good quote: “Remember, the end never really justifies the meanness.”

Jesus got angry in the Temple in Jerusalem. He wasn’t mean, he didn’t fly off the handle for no reason. There was a purpose to his anger. Sometimes, we need to get angry.

I. Jesus does some housecleaning.

In John’s telling of the story, Jesus does some housecleaning. He angrily drives out the money-changers and the livestock traders. He cries out, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

For Christians, the Temple in Jerusalem has been replaced by Jesus. “My Father’s house” becomes Jesus’ body. As his followers, we become a part of Jesus’ body. We become a part of a living Temple that welcomes the Spirit of God. The Church becomes an expression of the Temple, the body of Christ.

It’s a simple idea. Jesus replaces the Temple.

It’s complex as we try to live it out, as we apply it to our lives as Christians.

We like to think of ourselves as aligned with Jesus, opposing corruption and injustice that

disrupt the spiritual purpose of the Temple. But what if we were to look at the ways our own lives and our own church might be in need of some housecleaning?

What are we involved in that might disrupt the spiritual purpose of our lives and our church? What would Jesus “drive out,” if he were to visit our church in a prophetic frame of mind? If he were to visit the personal temples of our individual lives?

What do we worship? What is central to us? What do we value most? What do we give top priority in terms of how we spend our time, our talents and our treasure?

Do we worship God “in spirit and truth?” Or are we worshipping other things, things that are more important to us in our practical, everyday lives?

Do we take a stand for justice? Or do we ignore God’s preference for the poor and the outcast?

It’s challenging to find a balance when it comes to cleansing the temples of our hearts. There is a danger of sliding into being abusive – of ourselves or of others.

Remember that book, I’m OK, You’re OK, by Thomas Anthony Harris? It was on the New York Times bestseller list in the ‘70’s. I know some of you remember the ‘70’s. I also know some of you weren’t even born yet, so let me tell you about Harris’ book. He writes about four “life positions” that we have to choose from:

1. I’m Not OK, You’re OK
2. I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK
3. I’m OK, You’re Not OK
4. I’m OK, You’re OK – this is the preferred one -- if we can get there!

It’s a struggle. Lent brings this struggle to the fore. Do we allow ourselves to get dragged down by the Cross? Or do we allow ourselves to be lightweights who claim the Crown

with no suffering?

The challenge for Christians is to know the sufferings of Jesus on the cross, to know the suffering we have caused Him by our own sinfulness, and yet to also know that it's ok. We are loved and forgiven. We have a God who is with us in the worst of circumstances and in the best of circumstances. There is hope, there is joy, there is beauty, there is love.

There is fun. Jesus was a fun person, a charismatic person, someone who drew people to him. He went to parties -- and brought the wine! Have you seen pictures of Jesus laughing? Jesus laughed! Jesus, I am sure, told jokes. He had a great sense of humor. The greatest in the universe. God has to have a sense of humor. He made you and me, right?

Jesus also had a temper, as revealed in today's gospel reading. Jesus got angry about certain things. He had a passion for the worship of God – that such worship be offered “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). He had a passion for justice – that true faith includes concern for the poor and the outcast.

Psychologists tell us that we can't have full, exuberant joy in life without allowing ourselves to feel the difficult emotions – anger, sadness, shame, fear. If we shut ourselves off from awareness of the hard realities of life, then we shut ourselves off from the passion that fuels our joy. One author puts it this way:

“Anger is not the opposite of love; often it is love's clearest expression. How can we love people and stand by while they are wounded and exploited by selfish (people)... One of the most lamentable weaknesses of our generation lies in the lukewarmness of its love -- the feebleness of its protests growing out of its lukewarmness. Monstrous evils thrive right under our noses, become entrenched in politics and custom, grow brazenly insolent to every plea for decency and justice because we who are Christians do not speak” (J. Wallace Hamilton, Ride The Wild

Horses).

Jesus was not lukewarm. Jesus lived with passion. He did not avoid the hard realities of life. At the same time, he lived fully into the joy, the fun, and the beauty of life. So can you. So can I. It begins with centering ourselves in Him. He is the new Temple, the new presence of God on earth.

II. Confession: cleaning house.

A Sunday School class in a church once made an unusual request. They asked that the prayer of confession be taken out of the order of worship. They gave the following reasons:

1. Confessions imply that we are bad people.
2. Our children will get a negative image of themselves.
3. Guilt is damaging; we need to think positively.
4. Worship should always be uplifting and make us feel good.

This Sunday School class was wrong-headed. Confession is crucial to our faith. Confession is one way for us to cleanse the Temple of our hearts.

I like to think of confession as “earthiness” – as being “grounded.” I’m not a gardener; when I try to grow things – flowers, vegetables, even house plants -- they tend to die on me. But I do love to dig in the dirt. I loved making mud pies when I was a child.

This idea of earthiness, digging in the dirt, is a helpful one as we walk through Lent together. When we talk about repentance and confession, it’s a difficult conversation. No one likes to think of themselves as sinful. No one likes to look at the wrongs they’ve done, especially if they are still carrying around a load of guilt.

We’d prefer to avoid thinking about sin. We’d prefer to accentuate the positive, build self esteem, remind ourselves of our many good qualities and accomplishments.

It's not bad to be reminded of the positive, to build self esteem, to celebrate accomplishments.

But digging in the dirt, getting grounded, focusing on our "earthiness" – this is what gives our lives substance. To be a happy, brainless, cheerleader Christian is not helpful, to you or to anyone else. To be a grounded, earthy Christian, who knows he is loved and accepted by God in the worst of who he is as well as in the best of who he is – this is mature faith. This is true joy. This is life in Christ that looks with open eyes at the truth. This is a Christian who accepts the cross. And because she accepts the cross, she receives the crown with a joy that is deep and true and grounded and earthy.

It reminds me of the scene in The Lord of the Rings trilogy, towards the end. After three movies of battling against all odds, tortured by wizards, wounded by Orcs, abandoned by friends and at the end of all hope; after a final battle in which every good warrior expects to die for a lost cause -- victory is won. And when the victory is celebrated, a crown is placed on the head of King Aragorn. And we know how hard won that crown is. We know the sacrifices required, the people who died, the lands that were destroyed, the wounds that may never heal. The air is filled with petals from the flowers of the tree in the great city. There is joy and singing and shouting...and the joy is grounded in truth and hardship.

That's what repentance and confession is like. We dig in the dirt of our lives, not to beat ourselves up, but to ground ourselves in the truth. God already knows our truth; why do we keep trying to hide it? Once we are honest with ourselves, with God and with one other person, then we are free. Then our joy is earthy and grounded.

III. Justice: more housecleaning.

Besides our personal housecleaning, and our housecleaning within the church family,

there is also social housecleaning to be done. Jesus' anger is not only about the state of worship in the Temple. He is also angered by the injustice he sees all around him -- how the poor are neglected and the outcast are ignored. How poor widows give everything they have while the wealthy preside over a system of oppression and corruption.

Some of you are familiar with the writing of Madeleine L'Engle. She has inspired many people with her work. She reports that one Sunday she visited a unique Episcopal church in New York. A man stood up in that church and said, "I hope this is appropriate to ask. I was an abused child. I'm terrified of being an abusive father. I need help and prayer." Madeleine L'Engle knew then that this was a church she could stay in. "Because people are willing to be vulnerable," she says, "this church is very different. Sometimes it gets messy, but that's okay. People are not afraid to ask questions. We're able to admit we're all broken, we've all made terrible mistakes, we're all in need, and we all want things we don't have."

She said they meet in an upper room. The building was sold, and they gave all the beautiful things to the Metropolitan Museum. "There's not a mink coat in the place," she says, "and there's not anyone else my age there either. They're all very young, very alive. The five o'clock Eucharist is largely street people -- on drugs, HIV-positive, or with AIDS." One member told her it was the only place where he was called by his name. "It's a church in which a mother whose 27-year-old son has died is free to say, 'People think I'm terrible because I can't pray.' And I can reassure her, 'You don't have to pray. We're praying for you. That's what the body of Christ is about.'" (as quoted by King Duncan).

Closing.

God is now present in the Temples of our ordinary lives. God pitches His tent in your backyard. God rolls out His sleeping bag on your sofa. God has taken up residence among us.

We need to do some housecleaning now and then – confession of sins both personal and corporate. Taking action to right wrongs and to oppose injustice. Taking action to realign ourselves with God’s priorities for our lives and for our church.

May we do so courageously, confident in God’s great love for us.

Amen.