

“The Cleansing of the Church” GPPC 3-4-18
Psalm 19, John 2:13-22

I suspect people who've never worshiped in a church figure it's pretty boring. The same old, same old thing week after week. And there is some repetition, no doubt. But the words and music and the people change a bit from week to week. And if you're around the church a few years, eventually you'll witness all sorts of things that will linger in your memory.

On Christmas Eve in one church I served in Ohio, at the end of the services each year we sang “Silent Night” with lighted candles. One year, while standing at the pulpit near the beginning of the service, I look straight back through the windows at the back of the sanctuary. And I notice one of the church's elders getting a fire extinguisher from its compartment in the gathering area. He must be looking to see if it's properly charged. And then all of a sudden, I see white stuff billowing out of the extinguisher into the gathering area. Yep. That fire extinguisher works just fine.

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I did a summer wedding at a church I served in Pennsylvania. We had no air conditioning. It was July, and the temperature in the sanctuary was probably close to a hundred. I was in the middle of a prayer and I hear something go, “Thump!” I opened my eyes, and the bride’s teenaged son had passed out and hit his head. We had to call an ambulance. Fortunately, the kid was okay. We continued the service. Then, after the service, we also discovered that somebody had come into the church, snuck into the changing room, and cleaned out the bride’s and bridesmaids’ pocketbooks. All the other weddings I’ve conducted have been big improvements over that one.

I remember *attending* a wedding and as she recessed from the church, the bride’s dress caught on a lighted candelabrum and knocked it onto the sanctuary carpet. That was exciting.

I won’t even mention that I have a pastoral colleague who decided to walk a live horse into the sanctuary as part of worship. I’m serious. No bull.

Some of you could tell some church stories, couldn’t you?

Then we have the words and actions of Jesus this morning—talk about wild stuff. And this story, sometimes called “The Cleansing of the Temple” enjoys the rare distinction of being found in all four gospels in our Bible. All four gospel writers believed it was important enough to write about. And the early church, led by the Holy Spirit, thought it was significant enough to include four times in the New Testament.

It was near the Jewish festival of Passover, and pilgrims were making their way to the temple in Jerusalem. They would come to the temple and buy animals to sacrifice. One challenge—you had to pay for the animals with temple currency, not with the Roman money that might have offensive images on it. So how to do that? Moneychangers, of course, and they collected a small fee for each transaction. It was all standard operating procedure.

And then Jesus showed up. He saw what was happening. And all four gospels say he just lit into the moneychangers. John alone even says he made a whip. All say Jesus drove the moneychangers and livestock out. He poured out the coins, turned over the tables, and he yelled at

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everybody, “Get this stuff out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

Bet the people were saying, “Man, I liked that baby Jesus, ‘meek and mild,’ ‘no crying he makes,’ a lot better than this Jesus.” “Jesus, just chill! Ease down! We do this all the time. There’s no need to get upset.”

But there was reason to get upset. So Jesus burst into the temple and turned it upside down. A scholar says, “While the place appeared to fulfill its function, closer inspection revealed that it had forgotten its purpose....It had been taken over by buyers and sellers, consumers and marketers who knew how [to] fill the pews and meet the capital campaign goals. The ways of the world invade the church gradually, subtly, never intentionally, always in service of the church and its mission. Soon the church is full of cattle and sheep and turtledoves and money changers!” (*W. Hulitt Gloer in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, 95.*)

We don’t start out that way, but there’s always the danger of turning the church into just another commercial enterprise. Well-meaning people say, “The church is a business. Its members are customers. And we must keep the customers happy.” But Jesus says the

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church is not a business. And its members are not customers. The church is something else and so are its members.

John says “the Jews” have a question for Jesus. And as we’ve said before, it’s important to avoid anti-Semitism when we read the words “the Jews” in John’s gospel. So we remember this is not a reference to all Jews in Jesus’ time or in ours. In John’s gospel it probably means a particular group of Jews who are adversaries of Jesus who was himself, a Jew. As someone else has suggested, when you hear the words “the Jews,” feel free to substitute “the Presbyterians.”

Oddly enough, the Jews/Presbyterians did not dispute what Jesus had said and done. What they questioned was his authority. “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I’ll raise it up.”

But as happens so often in John’s gospel the people and Jesus talked past each other. The Jews/Presbyterians said, “What’re you talking about? The temple’s been under construction forty-six years, and you’re going to raise it up in three days? Right.”

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But John says Jesus was talking about the temple of his body. Jesus would die, but he would be raised in three days.

What is the church? Not a business, it's the body of Christ in the world. Who are church members? Not customers, we're disciples, followers, of Christ.

And this is so difficult and so wonderful at the same time. It's difficult because we naturally want to get whatever we like. And we're accustomed to getting whatever we demand. We go into the grocery store and there are forty different choices of ice cream, thirty different choices of pizza, and fifty different choices of bread. We go to a restaurant and order what we want, and send it back if it doesn't suit us. And the customer is always right.

So pastors want to shop around for the perfect church that will never disappoint them. Church members want to find the perfect pastor or pastors who will never irritate them, the flawless worship service that will always make them feel the way they want to feel every time, the unblemished faith community that will never let them down. Where is that money changing table?

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Almost thirty-five years ago, a preaching professor wrote about this passage, we've all known Christians who "when there was a change in the building or minister or pattern of worship, suddenly ended all participation...we want to be in charge of our own lives and manage all our relationships with God. [But] those who know that Christ is our sanctuary also know what the church building is, and is not." (Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B, Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, 54-55.)

And that leads us at last to what is so wonderful about what Jesus says. Our life together is not about the perfect church community, or pastor, or worship experience, or building. No. It's about the living Christ who is our sanctuary. No matter what happens, the sanctuary of Christ cannot be destroyed, because he just rises again from the dead.

In his book, *Blood Brothers*, Archbishop Elias Chacour tells about his decades-long peacemaking work in Israel/Palestine. In his younger days, Chacour had been sent to a crumbling church in a tiny Palestinian village to minister there. But the previous priests had been irresponsible and Chacour was met with hostility and indifference by a number of the residents. In addition there was feuding and lack of forgiveness not only

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in the church but within families, exemplified by four brothers whose hatred of each other was not even mended at the death of their own mother. Chacour began to despair that anything would improve, but then in prayer he heard a plan.

Worship attendance was poor, except near Christmas and Easter when attendance improved dramatically. So on Palm Sunday Chacour launched the plan. As worship began, he noted not only the full pews but the angry faces, icy stares. Nervous, he says he preached “the most unimpassioned sermon my life.” The congregation’s indifference was palpable. At the end of the service, the congregation stood as he offered the benediction. Then Chacour marched to the back of the sanctuary, closed the great double doors, slipped a chain through the door handles, and locked them with padlock. (You could not do this today. We do have fire codes to follow.)

Chacour went back to the front of the sanctuary. He looked at the congregation and said, “Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian.” The nuns were praying hard at this point.

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“You are a people divided,” he said. “You argue and hate each other—gossip and spread malicious lies. What do the [Muslims] and the unbelievers think when they see you? Surely that your religion is false. If you can’t love your brother and sister that you see, how can you say you love God who is invisible? You have allowed the body of Christ to be disgraced.” At this point, the congregation’s shock turned to anger.

Chacour continued, “For many months, I have tried to unite you. I’ve failed, because I’m only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus Christ. He is the one who gives you power to forgive. So now I will be quiet and allow Him to give you that power. If you *will not* forgive, we will stay locked in here. You can kill each other and I’ll provide your funerals gratis.”

Chacour says the minutes dragged by, three, five, ten. He assumed he had utterly failed, wasting months of work. And then there was movement. A man stood, “I am sorry [he said]...I am the worst one of all. I’ve hated my own brothers. Hated them so much I wanted to kill them. More than any of you, I need forgiveness.”

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The floodgates opened as congregants stood and asked each other and Chacour for forgiveness for gossip, lies, lack of kindness and welcome. They decided to celebrate Easter early. Chacour says, “Before my eyes, I was seeing a ruined church rebuilt at last—not with mortar and rock, but with living stones.” (Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 172-175.)

Though so much of our lives is focused upon our being customers, here is one place, thank God, that is not true. We are, in fact, not customers but fellow pilgrims who’ve come to the sanctuary that is Christ. We’ve come to share what we’ve encountered on the way. We’ve come to gather around the words of Jesus, to be instructed and fed by Word and Sacrament, to have dialogue and seek to discern God’s will in a complex world. We’ve come to laugh at the ridiculous things that happen here and in our lives, and to share our hurts and fears and our struggles as brothers and sisters. We’ve come to hug and hold hands. We’ve come to forgive and be forgiven. We’ve come to work together to help heal a broken world, to feed the hungry, educate the ignorant, protect the vulnerable, welcome the stranger, and seek mercy and fairness for all people.

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We've come, but not as consumers, not as customers, and certainly not as business managers, calling the shots. We've come to sit together, sing together, listen together, eat and drink together, laugh and cry together, pray together, worship together, all as the Body of Christ. And oh, dear God by your grace, what a beautiful body we are. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal

Spiritual practice: Honoring the Body. Sometimes we say that our bodies are temples in which God lives. So for this week's spiritual discipline (or as our youth say "holy habit") we are invited to choose one good thing to do for your body this week, just one. Sleep more. Eat a little bit better food. Go for a walk or a run or a swim or push your wheelchair (see your doctor, if this is unusual for you). Drink more water. Drink less alcohol (or none if you're an alcoholic). Get a massage. Come up with your own practice. This week as part of living out our faith, do one thing to honor your body, the temple of God.