

Spring Cleaning

John 2:13-22

It's spring cleaning time. As the weather gets nicer, we want to open up the windows and let fresh air in. We want to get everything cleaned and organized, to start fresh. While the phrase "cleanliness is next to godliness" can be traced in English to John Wesley in 1791, the idea has ancient roots. With our modern obsession with germs and allergens, cleaning is often seen as a must. You can find all sorts of lists of what to clean and how to clean it, from Martha Stewart to Good Housekeeping to HGTV. Books like "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing" by Marie Kondo or "The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning" continue to top bestseller lists, and Netflix has recently ordered a reality series based on Marie Kondo's book.

But for many, cleaning up also becomes an impossible burden. Last year, fed up with the many clean house guides on Pinterest and other social media sites, blogger Meredith Ethington posted "A Real Mom's Guide To A Clean House" — a foolproof cleaning method that involves steps like "soak dishes in soapy water so it appears you're going to clean them," "look under couch cushions for lost food," "pick up all the stuff on the floors and shove them in a closet" and of course, "cry." Left with that impossible burden, some do just give up. Others realize they need help, and get a cleaning crew to come in and do the cleaning they don't have the time or inclination to do. But the truth is that entropy always increases, and everything always gets dirty and needs to get cleaned again.

At first glance, it seems that's what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel lesson, an episode often referred to as the cleansing of the temple. Jesus is doing a version of spring cleaning with the temple, driving out all of the things that were making the temple dirty, the things getting in the way of the true purpose of the temple. Just as he frequently argued with the Pharisees about their rules getting in the way of following God, so Jesus is flipping tables and driving out livestock so people can get into the temple unimpeded.

But more is going on than Jesus just trying to clear out the temple. He's not just doing some spring cleaning. Jesus does what he did for two specific reasons. The first reason he's cleaning it out is because they've made the temple into a house of trade. Now, the

merchants are there for what seems to be valid reasons. The moneychangers are there to make sure the dirty Gentile money, with carved images of the emperor on them, doesn't make it into the temple to defile it by breaking the first commandment. The others selling animals are there to provide sacrifices. People who traveled great distances to the temple to offer sacrifices for their sins couldn't always bring an animal from that far away. The pigeons were sold to those who were among the poorest of the poor. While all of the merchants in the temple were there to do necessary things, there's disagreement over how much extra they added to their transaction costs. If you've ever tried to change money in an airport or a foreign country, you know there's always some sort of fee added to the costs of the transactions. Even if their reasons for being there were valid, they still distracted from what was supposed to be a worshipful atmosphere in the temple.

But the second reason Jesus is cleaning out the temple is because the animals and what they represent are no longer necessary. The system of sacrifices established in the Old Testament were done because so many things made you dirty. The people needed to come at least once a year to offer sacrifices to make themselves clean. Priests also offered daily sacrifices on behalf of all of Israel, and the costs for those were covered by a temple tax, part of the reason the money changers were in the temple.

But the reason the sacrifices needed to be repeated was because they didn't work well enough. The sacrifices had to be repeated annually, if not more often, because the people couldn't stay clean on their own. They needed to make up for their sins. But the sacrifices didn't solve the problem. "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:1-4).

The sacrifices were done to take away sins, but they couldn't do what they claimed to do. Instead, Jesus came to offer himself as the one sacrifice for sins. Two years later, Jesus would be crucified at Passover, showing himself to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The one sacrifice that could work forgiveness for the whole world. The one sacrifice that would make all other sacrifices unnecessary. One sacrifice once for all.

He wouldn't just replace the sacrifices in the temple, though. He would replace the temple itself! As a symbol of God's presence with his people, the temple when it existed was one of the most impressive buildings ever created. In the forty six years mentioned in the Gospel lesson, it was still incomplete! Yet it was destroyed by the Romans and remains in ruins to this day on one of the most contested pieces of land in the whole world. But Jesus changed that. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus would tell the Samaritan woman at the well that the time was coming when people wouldn't worship God in Jerusalem or Samaria, but in spirit and truth wherever they were. God had come down to them to make His people clean.

We still are unclean people. We still need to be cleaned because of the sins we commit, the good things we fail to do, and our sinful nature. We still need to come to God and ask for Him to create a clean heart within us. God still comes down to us to be with us and make us clean. This morning we celebrate another baptism, where sins are washed away. As we do that, we're reminded of our own baptisms, and how we have been cleansed from sin. We hear the words of absolution and are cleansed from our sins. We come forward to receive the Lord's Supper and receive God's forgiveness.

We may fail in our spring cleaning at home. We may fail to clean ourselves. But because of Jesus, the one who cleansed the temple and the one whose death cleanses us, we are forgiven and declared clean. That's a wonderful feeling to have.

Pastor David Beagley
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