

“Have You Started Your Spring Cleaning?”

John 2:12-22

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
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Have you started yet? Warm weather and spring cleaning go together and the warm weather is here. It is time to go where no man has gone before; the attic, basement, and those overstuffed closets, dragging out things you even forgot you saved.

What kind of spring cleaner are you? Do you merely rearrange your junk so you can see it better or do you actually throw things away? Maybe you are like me. I throw away Jackie's junk but keep my precious treasures.

Have you ever done any spring cleaning in a church? When I pastored country churches, we had an annual spring cleaning day. Members would come in their pickup trucks with their chain saws, hedge clippers, water buckets and cleaning supplies prepared to spruce up the church. I would always get amused at some of those that worked inside. They would go through closets and drawers, pulling everything out but would have the hardest time throwing anything away.

What if this was given to the church in memory of someone? Do you think a teacher still uses this? Can we throw away something that has scripture on it? What will happen to us if we toss a picture of Jesus, maybe the only authentic one at that?

Needless to say, it took a lot of time to deep clean a church and many things never made it to the back of Bubba's truck. They were merely straightened and returned to their designated places.

I don't think Jesus had the same problem many of us seem to have. He wasn't the least bit timid about getting rid of things that did not need to be in the temple and it didn't take him long to do it. Can you imagine what he could have done with a chain saw and a pickup truck?

What happened on the day that Jesus went to the temple described in John 2:12-22? To be candid with you, this is one of the most shocking stories in the New Testament. Jesus entered the temple on a business-as-usual day and turned his visit into anything but routine.

Why did he get angry and run some people away? What kind of reaction did it cause? Why does John put this story at the beginning of Jesus ministry while the Synoptic writers include it as a part of Passion Week? If this was the only story about Jesus you had access to, what would it tell you about him?

Frederick Beuchner says the Bible is a book of questions. This one certainly doesn't lack for any, does it? Let's examine some of them.

What happened at the temple on this day? Jesus became angry as he entered the crowded Court of the Gentiles that had been turned into a religious mall. The money changers and animal sellers had taken over this holy space, turning it into anything but a house of prayer. Since mandatory temple taxes could not be paid with secular coins that had a human image on them, money had to be exchanged for approved currency, kosher coins of the purest silver from the city of Tyre. Guess who took advantage of the people and padded their pockets with exorbitant exchange rates? It was the religious leaders who claimed to be God's representatives.

Worshippers also had to offer animal sacrifices as part of the Passover celebration. How interesting that inspectors frequently found flaws in the animals pilgrims brought from home but knew where unblemished animals could be bought, for a high price, of course.

Jesus saw through this manipulative scheme and became incensed that it was happening, of all places, in the temple. The only place available for Gentiles to worship had been taken over by the greedy religious leaders and this was unacceptable. In addition, the poor were being exploited and were powerless to do anything about it. They had no advocate or defender. They were helpless victims of religious racketeers that sucked the last coin out of their pockets while

on their way to worship. What Jesus witnessed could not be ignored. Someone had to do something about it and he knew it.

So what did Jesus do? He overturned the tables of the money changers and scattered their coins. He fashioned some reeds and cords into a whip and ran the offenders and their animals out of the courtyard. To those who sold doves, the animal of choice for the poorest peasants, he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!” John 2:16.

What was the reaction of those whose lives and businesses were disrupted? Mark tells us that the chief priests and teachers of the law began looking for a way to kill him. I’m not surprised. When you mess with people’s ability to make or spend money, you discover a side of them you never knew. It can bring the worst out in people. This was certainly true for Annas, the former high priest whose family controlled this thriving business. Profitable it was, too. In his book, Synopsis of the Four Gospels, Kurt Aland surmises that Annas and his family of high priests were managing a \$170,000,000 annual business. It was the biggest business in the country and Annas was the patriarch of the wealthiest family.

Do you recall where Jesus was taken immediately upon his arrest? “The detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year” John 12-13. After questioning Jesus, Annas sent him to Caiaphas’ home, where the teachers of the law and elders were assembled.

Do you see the connection and reason for taking Jesus to Annas and Caiaphas? Follow the money. The religious system of Jesus’ day had lost its way and Jesus exposed and challenged those responsible. They were incensed and prepared to retaliate.

If this was the only story about Jesus you had access to, what would it reveal about him? For me, it would reveal a lot of good things. In this story, I see a boldly courageous Jesus with deep convictions and strong passion confronting greedy and corrupt leaders. I hear a spokesman for God and an advocate for the poor telling all people the temple was open for worship and prayer. I sense a compassionate Jesus making it possible for every offering to be accepted by a gracious God.

Why do you think John inserted this story at the beginning of his book where he used it to introduce us to Jesus? The synoptic writers placed it in the closing week of his life where it was viewed as the final straw that led to his death. John used this story, however, to identify Jesus and his mission.

What was that mission? Jesus came to reveal what was important to God and how far the religious leaders had strayed from it. He came to embody Micah’s dream that God’s people “do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God.” As a result, he came to restore integrity, honesty, humility, compassion, mercy, grace, peace, tolerance, inclusiveness, and community to the highest place in man’s priorities and relationships.

As his disciples, isn’t this to be our mission and purpose, too? Aren’t we to pray, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” and use all our influence to make it happen? I think so.

How do we do it? For most of us, we begin by spring cleaning our own hearts and houses. We acknowledge the clutter in our lives that has prevented us from worshiping and praying. We confess we have focused our efforts upon building our own kingdom, not His, and have been so consumed with getting ahead that we have ignored those left behind. We recognize the economic and social barriers we have erected in the church that have made it difficult for some to worship and pray.

Then, we ask God to forgive us while helping us to rearrange our values and priorities. We ask Him to help us restore integrity, honesty, humility, compassion, mercy, grace, peace, tolerance, inclusiveness, and community to the highest place in man’s priorities and relationships. We seek a passion for His work with deep convictions about pursuing justice and peace, while building bridges of reconciliation.

This sounds like spiritual spring cleaning, doesn't it? Like any cleaning project, it doesn't seem easy and it is not. It is, however, very rewarding. Lent invites us to do this and introduces us to the Savior that can help us. I hope you will let him.