



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SPRING CLEANING”

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 4, 2018
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: *Thanks be to God.*

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Walking into the sanctuary this morning, some of you may have looked over at the church marquee and noticed the sermon title: “Spring Cleaning.” I realize that title may seem a little bit out-of-place, especially when we consider that the temperature of the day started out at 45 degrees; but, keep in mind two things: 1) in just over two weeks the first day of spring will be upon us, and 2) it was a lot warmer when I started writing this sermon!

Nevertheless, it does seem apparent to me that the spring cleaning bug is beginning to catch, even if the temperature sometimes beguiles us. In our own home, for example, a healthy measure of spring cleaning is already underway.

Our gutters were recently cleaned...

Harrison was outside just yesterday pressure washing the deck...

Various items from the garage are beginning to make their way to the various agencies or curbside in some cases...

closets are being assessed...and subsequently purged, I might add...

Even the windows in our home are beginning to be opened with greater frequency...or consider that yesterday a number of the students in our youth group were capitalizing on the impending reality of spring by going to members' homes and raking leaves, painting – doing all sorts of odd jobs.

And not only did they raise some money for their summer mission trips, but they also helped several members get their yards and their homes in better order as collectively we begin to emerge from the recent winter months.

This coming Saturday is yet another opportunity for us to be about the business of cleaning, and freshening up and doing those kinds of things that would be generally helpful for several of the local ministries that we support as a church family. We call it “SCOTS Day,” and, if you haven't signed up yet, I hope you will, there will be a table outside following worship.

All this is to say that spring cleaning comes in all different shapes and sizes, and, in this morning's New Testament Lesson, we get a sense of what it looks like for Jesus; though, I must warn you, and James has already said as much in the children's message, this is certainly not a cleaning in our common sense of the word. In fact, it was actually quite uncommon what happened.

Imagine having approached the sanctuary from Meeting Street this morning – and, after having scratched your head over the sermon title – you notice several chairs sort of piled up in a heap on the portico. Then you see a pew or two discarded in the flower beds off to the right and to the left. You get a little bit closer – you're intrigued – and you hear some commotion. And thank goodness you're paying attention, because out the door flies four or five hymnals. You see one of the ushers and ask them: “What in the world is going on in there?” And their reply comes: “You're not going to believe it; but, Jesus is in there, and he's cleaning house.”

I suggest that somewhat imaginative, albeit extreme scenario in an effort to try and convey something of the surprise, if not the shock, that the people must have felt who were in to the temple that day – how they must have felt when they saw Jesus pour out the coins of the money changers and overturn their tables...as he declared to all who were gathered: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!”

I suppose we'd be surprised as well. I mean, years earlier when Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, first brought him to the temple and offered that sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, we certainly didn't witness any of this kind of drama.

And when Jesus returned to the temple as a young boy – anger didn't mark that visit either. Granted, there may have been some anger on the part of his parents who were worried sick over where Jesus was – remember, they had lost track of him for a little while. When Mary

finally found him and expressed their anguish, Jesus had this to say: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s House?”

Ah, but this visit to his Father’s house was different! The cleaning of the temple on that day was not simply a matter of turning over furniture and running people out of the building...it was about cleaning spiritual lives and turning over entire systems and structures which ran contrary to the will and intention of God.

Jesus was effectively opening the windows of the Temple and allowing the fresh air of God’s Spirit to blow in and circulate in that place. Oh, Jesus was like fresh wine in an old wineskin, breaking that old brittle bag apart with the expansion of God’s grace and God’s mercy; Jesus was like yeast in cold, wet dough, causing it to change, causing it to rise.

In fact, he told them as much: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Of course, he was talking about the temple of his body.

I seriously doubt that few people, if any, could have seen the events of that day coming. I mean, could anyone have anticipated those kinds of actions emerging from the one who we know to have said, “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

This is, after all, the same gentle Christ who we are told would not even quench a burning wick – and now we see him making a whip of cords and driving out sheep and cattle...it seems so out of character! It is certainly not the kind of cleaning that we would have expected...and yet it is precisely the kind of cleaning that we get.

Of course, the cleaning we read about in this morning’s New Testament Lesson involves “cleaning” in a spiritual sense. For Jesus, it is a matter of restoring and reconciling us to God. Jesus knows that there are pieces of furniture that get in our way of loving God and neighbor – coin tables and clutter, dust and debris – call it whatever we want, it’s there!

And while spring cleaning may seem an outdated sort of ritual – one that is more often than not linked with our homes and the cleaning of stuff which accompanies the changing of seasons – when it comes to this season of Lent, a wonderful time when we prepare our hearts and minds for God’s redemptive work at Easter time, when it comes to the season of Lent, Christ’s Church, and her people today need God’s cleansing presence just as much as that temple scene needed it some than 2000 years ago.

Granted, our problem may not be that we have made our Father’s house a marketplace. Our docent following services this morning (Megan, I believe it is) she won’t be inviting people to peruse our fine selection of cattle. She won’t be carrying one of those fancy phone / credit card swiping gizmos, reminding people that it takes money to run a church.

No! Our situation is different. There is no marketplace here, nor do we find ourselves gathered to celebrate the Passover while unbeknownst to us the very Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world is standing in our midst!

Oh, we know the rest of the story – we know the truth of the Gospel. But do we really? In every facet of the church’s life together, does she fully testify to the claims of the Gospel? Does

the church today always manage to bear witness to God's commandments and God's covenants? Do all of our ecclesiastical systems and structures – our thoughts, words and deeds – do they always yield to God, without fail, and to nothing else at all? Is there nothing about Christ's Church that needs to be reformed?

And we have yet to say anything about our own lives! Indeed, we are no more perfect than the people who were in the temple that day! No more righteous are we than they, no more sinless.

Are there not are places in each of our lives that need to be bleached clean, that occasional mold around our duct work that needs to be removed, and that dust behind our life's dressers that needs to be vacuumed! One of the great joys of Lent is that we are presented with an extended period of time when God can, once again, clean our hearts and our minds, and we so desperately need God to do that!

Today we celebrated the sacrament of Baptism and we affirmed that, in the waters of baptism, we are washed clean; but, we are still Presbyterian, and we know that we still get dirty, just by living at all.

I ran across a wonderful conversation the other day between a human and his dog, it was written as a news article. The owner was throwing the ball and the dog was retrieving it...“Good boy,” the owner said, “Good boy, Rupert.” And with that he picked up the ball and threw it again. To his surprise, however, this time Rupert just sat there, clearly frustrated...until Rupert spoke up. “Why do you call me good? Don't you know that no one is good save God alone? The owner responded: “Yes, I suppose I do know that.” Rupert, clearly a canine of the Presbyterian persuasion, I would think, then proceeded to lecture his owner on how important it is to remember our fallenness and how much we need God's love. Sensing that his owner had really gotten the message, Rupert proceeded to fetch the ball.

Friends, however we learn that most important lesson in life, we had better learn it, and Lent is a great time for us to do so, for in this season we are especially invited to think about how frail we are and how much we need God's mercy.

This is a singularly poignant season in which we, by God's grace, can partner with God and do some of our very best spiritual spring cleaning, and we can do this through such simple disciplines as penitent faith, devotion and study, listening to God's Word, acts of compassion and service.

Still, the question remains: If Jesus were to say, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” to what would he be referring? Is there any attitude or activity either in Christ's Church or in our own life that gets in the way of our service to God? Is there anything about us that needs to be cleaned?

When we first claimed God's love for our own, we had to know that our lives could not and would not remain the same. Faith is not about being patted on the back and sent out into the world as the picture of perfection. Faith is about an ongoing, life-transforming relationship with

the very God who is not finished with us yet – there is much more creating, much more cleaning left to do.

On our journey, we would sincerely love to hear at times those affirming words: “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and we do many times, but sometimes, perhaps on those occasions when we have grown too comfortable, or too familiar or too focused on things other than the One whose temple was destroyed and built again in three days – perhaps, on those occasions, we will realize again that God may yet have some rather significant renovations in store for us.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, our prayer is simple this day...Create in us a clean heart! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.