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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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John 2:13-22

“Take Up the Challenge”

House cleaning. It is one of my least favorite things to do. Now, don't get me wrong – I do it, but only because I have to and cannot currently afford to pay someone to do it for me. Ah, those were good days when I could afford Molly Maids. But unfortunately one of the kids needed braces, so straight teeth trumped the house cleaner. (Come on, crooked teeth aren't that bad, are they?!)

So on Mondays, I set about the task of cleaning, a task I sometimes wonder if anyone even notices since I know that by 5:30 or so, after everyone has gotten home, the front hall and family room and kitchen will just be cluttered again with 4 backpacks, musical instruments, a gym bag, shoes – oh, the endless shoes, and paper. There's always paper. Permission slips, junk mail, spelling tests, calendars, school newsletters, and artwork. And the paper just seems to get moved from one pile to another pile; I just can't seem to keep up with the paper. One of the things I look forward to the most at Spring Break is not a beach in Florida, but the lack of school papers that will come into my house.

Added on top of the cleaning is also the task of sorting and going through stuff – you know, the deep clean, the spring cleaning that we set-about doing at this time of year. There have been times, many times, in fact, that I've literally gotten on my hands and knees with a broom to reach for all of the stuff that accumulates under the kids' beds. The socks, clothes, toys, that make their way into the black hole underside of the bed. On those days, I go about my work full steam ahead, and do the big clean sweep – because I know when I'm done the junk will be gone. And that I do like – I like it when the junk is gone, the clutter cleared. It's also the type of cleaning that makes the kids stand up and take notice.

Just like the people in the temple that day who watched Jesus do the big clean sweep . . . they stood up and took notice of what he was doing. We may call this story the “cleansing of the temple”, but let's be honest; Jesus is angry. Very, very angry. So why is he so angry?

When our story from John opens, it's Passover. Passover, as you know, is a high, holy day for Jews. People came from all over the area to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. If you were a faithful Jew, you made the pilgrimage no matter what.

Jesus is a faithful Jew, so like everyone else he comes to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. When he gets there he goes to the temple because the temple is where a Jew celebrates Passover.

Now, the temple was a magnificent place. Herod the Great had begun a massive restoration of the temple about 50 years before Jesus; it was Herod's way of trying to win over his subjects. The expansion was still underway in Jesus' day. It must have been a sight to behold.

The temple courtyard was open to anyone, even Gentiles. And it was sort of like a modern-day farmer's market, but this market included animals and moneychangers in addition to fruits and vegetables. It was also a very noisy place because cattle, sheep, turtledoves, people and coins make noise.

Now, you might think, "Why the heck is there a farmer's market in the temple's front yard?"

Well, the market was necessary to keep the temple operating. For example, people had to pay a tax to the temple, and that tax had to be paid in temple currency, so money changers were necessary. The normal currency had the image of the emperor on its coins, but because no graven images were allowed within the temple walls, those coins couldn't be used to pay the temple tax. So moneychangers were available in the outer courtyard to exchange legal coins for temple coins so people could pay their temple tax.

The same is true for the animals. People were expected to sacrifice a blemish free animal in the temple. So vendors sold animals outside the temple for people who made the long trek to Jerusalem without an animal, or for people whose animal became blemished during the trek.

The exchange of money and selling of animals was necessary to keep the temple functioning. And in order to make it easier for people to do their necessary part

to keep the temple running, the courtyard was set-up as a convenience for the worshippers; it was never meant to be a hindrance.

What Jesus saw that day, what got him so angry, was that while the temple appeared to be fulfilling its purpose, closer inspection revealed that it had really lost its way. The trappings were in the right place, but it had lost sight of its mission which was, very simply, to worship and praise God and serve God's people.

Entering the temple Jesus discovered that appearances could be deceiving. What he saw that day was an outrage. So he made a whip, and moving through the market with it, he created holy havoc. He left no table unturned and no one untouched.

"Out! All of you! Get these things out of my father's house. They don't belong here!"

Jesus is angry. Very angry. Anyone who makes a whip and uses it in a public place is angry.

This is not the Jesus we like to meet. Generally, we prefer Jesus nice and sedated. The kind we meet in pictures in old Bibles, the one who is surrounded by sheep and children and looks a little like our older brother with a beard. We like that Jesus. We understand that Jesus. We can relate to that Jesus. That Jesus is nice and kind and doesn't want to upset anyone.

Of course, in the Bible we also meet a Jesus who is loud and prophetic and upsets the apple cart, just like today. And while we get a little on edge with that Jesus, there's something about that that is attractive. We like to stand up and cheer for the Jesus who rights the wrongs of the world.

Reading this, we may even be tempted to take up the whip with him and denounce the moneychangers and sheep herders and anyone else who's doing things they shouldn't be doing. And yet, Jesus' anger is not really directed at the shepherders or moneychangers; Jesus knew they were doing their job to keep the temple running smoothly and assist the Passover worshippers.

No, Jesus' anger is directed at all the people who had forgotten that the reason they are there in the first place is to worship and praise God and serve God's

people. His anger was directed at all the people who had let their lives be consumed and cluttered with stuff that was unimportant. So before we cancel next year's Girl Scout cookie sale too quickly, there's more to this story than cleansing the temple.

The story asks us to look very deeply within our very own souls and do some decluttering of our own. And Lent is a great time to do that, to roll up our sleeves, take up the challenge, of decluttering our lives, of radically clearing out the stuff that closes out God.

I recently came across a book titled "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of De-Cluttering and Organizing" by Marie Kondo. The book is more than just a how-to declutter, and not just another system to help deal with the paper. The book is based on the principle of only keeping items that "spark joy." I like that – the idea of only keeping items that spark joy. As I read that, I really started doing a mental inventory of my closet, or even the basement, and thought, "Huh, I have a lot of stuff that doesn't really spark joy." And yet, I hold on to it thinking that some day I'll wear it or use it or I don't get rid of it because it holds sentimental meaning. But spark joy? That's a different way of thinking about something.

The other thing that she says in the book, is that if you decide to get rid of something, thank it for its service and let it go. After reading that I went back to my mental inventory of my closet, and my basement, and thought about some of the items I've held on to but really don't need to. Do I really need to hold on to my children's crib? I don't know that I do. Does it spark joy in me? Not really. Can I thank it for its service? Most definitely.

Someone who has read the book (and by the way, I'd love to read it with a group if anyone is up for that), someone who has read the book wrote, "There was something shockingly vulnerable, and then surprisingly spiritually cleansing about this practice. It's opening up the possibility within me that feels like Sabbath, living into God's freedom instead of slavery . . . of making space within me so that I can bring joy to others."

Friends, I think this story about Jesus cleansing the temple unsettles us not because he's so angry in it, but because what we asks us to do leaves us vulnerable. After all, one of the reasons we hold on to stuff – both physical and

mental stuff – is because it serves as a sort of barrier to protect us. We hold on to physical items because well, you just never know when you might need it . . . like the apocalypse is going to come and I just won't be ready for it if I don't hold on to those dining room chairs that are stacked in my basement. Or we hold on to some of the mental stuff because it protects us from the feelings that are just below the surface, the ones we don't really want to get in touch with, because doing that leaves us vulnerable.

This week, I'm asking you to take up the challenge of radically clearing out the stuff in your life that closes out God. You can start small, with your closet for example. What sparks joy there? If it doesn't, thank it for its service, and let it go. Or, is there a mental thing you're hanging on to that closes out God? I can think of something in my life that I need to let go; that is definitely closing out God.

Thomas Merton once said:

“The purpose of Lent is not only expiation (penance), to satisfy the divine justice, but above all a preparation to rejoice in His love. And this preparation consists in receiving the gift of His mercy—a gift which we receive insofar as we open our hearts to it, casting out what cannot remain in the same room with mercy.”

As you go through your week, consider the question: What in your life cannot remain in the same room as mercy? And after considering it and coming to a conclusion, cast it out. You might even thank it for its service, if it's appropriate to do so. But think about that, think about the space in your home or your head that needs to be cleared to make space for God.

Challenging? Yes. Impossible? No. Can it take time? Absolutely.

But Lent is a great time to do some spring cleaning of the soul.

May we all bravely clear away the clutter within, between, and around us, to be filled with the presence of God and ready for the gifts God is waiting to bestow.

Amen.

