

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Cleaning House”

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John 2: 13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ ¹⁹Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ²⁰The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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

Much to my daughter’s chagrin, I have taken the advice of a church growth expert and joined the internet community of *Facebook* . One of my *Facebook* friends has started an interesting new group on that social community. She is a spouse of a minister and part of the group that I met with in Milwaukee this past week. The group that she created is entitled, “Spouses and Children of Ministers Who Do Not Want to be Used as Sermon Illustrations.” When I mentioned this in my home this week, it appeared that the group has the potential to be extremely popular.

I must admit that I am guilty of occasionally using Laura, Maren or Amelia as sermon material. I know that it might be quite inconsiderate to do so. After all, no one wants their personal life displayed like an open book in front of an entire congregation. I realize that it is probably not a very compassionate or professional thing to do. And I was taught by one of my preaching instructors that I was never to embarrass any family members from the pulpit. But I also recognize that sometimes my wife and daughters are just too perfect of examples of the gospel teachings of Jesus for me to dismiss. I have to talk about them!

Today I have a question for parents of teenagers. How many of your children have clean bedrooms? I think teenagers with clean bedrooms are abnormal. Clean rooms are sometimes an issue at the Ritter home. I think that both of my girls believe that a room is clean is the heating vents are exposed, the door is able to open, the television screen can be viewed, and if you can see just enough of the carpet to identify

the color. I guess it is quite understandable. With more important things going on in their lives, things like school and friends, cell phones and friends, the internet and friends- clean bedrooms are not a priority for them. For most teenagers, cleaning a room is shoving things into the closet or under the bed.

My spouse, on the other hand, operates from a different perspective. I believe that Laura is a direct descendant of some kind of relationship between Mr. Clean and Mrs. Murphy of the famous oil soap. While I tend to ignore unmade beds and piles of clothes on the floor, that kind of stuff can drive Laura crazy. Every so often she will work up a fever and energy and actually enter Amelia's room with a trash bag in hand. Hours later she will emerge with several full bags leaving a suddenly tidy room. Amelia just dreads these cleaning binges and the very thought of them hangs over her head like a major deterrence against complete room-trashing. I am certain that Amelia is afraid that in cleaning Laura might find something that has been missing for months or throw away something the Amelia deems valuable.

I can remember, when the girls were very young, reading the classic series of children's book *The Berenstain Bears*. These stories presented some wonderful lessons for children and adults. One book was about cleaning your bedroom. The introduction says, "When small bears forget to pick up, store and stash, some of their favorite things end up in the trash." From that, you kind of know how the book might end! The key moment in the story comes when Mama Bear gets so angry over the mess in Brother and Sister's room that she loses her temper. "The mess just seems to build and build up until one day...maybe it was because Mama's back was a little stiff, or maybe it was stepping on Brother's airplane cement, or maybe she was just fed up with that messy room, but whatever it was...she stormed into the cubs' room with a big box. 'The first thing we need to do is get rid of all this junk!' she said. Brother and Sister watched with horror as Mama began to throw things into the box." Talk about art imitating life! I was thrilled to find that my family isn't described just in sermons but also in childhood books!

There are times when a mess is so bad, only a radical housecleaning will do. That is what the lesson of Scripture is all about today. The gospel of John describes Jesus entering the Temple. While the other gospel writers describe this event near the end of Jesus' ministry, John is the only writer to put the incident near the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It follows the changing of the water to wine at the wedding in Cana. In that miracle, Jesus pointed out the importance of acts of compassion against lifeless ritual.

Worship at the Temple had become somewhat corrupt. Outside the most sacred area a marketplace had developed. Animals were sold for sacrifice. Currency was exchanged. While such commerce was originally designed to assist and improve the worship of God, things had gotten a little messy. Vendors selling animals for sacrifice were now gouging patrons. Moneychangers exchanging Roman money for Temple money were taking a cut to line their pockets. Some merchants were even claiming their Temple products would produce a more favorable response from God. There was a claim of divine endorsement to their advertising. The traffic at the Temple business mall became more important than worship. People were more concerned about making a worldly deal in the marketplace than they were about making a holy deal with God in worship.

Jesus had seen about enough. He had found a faith that was stale, secular, and downright dirty. Ritual was more important than one's heart. He took a whip and drove the money changers out of the Temple. He overturned the tables carrying all of the merchant's products. He raged against the worldly and the mundane. "How dare you turn my Father's house into a shopping mall?" Like my spouse and Mama Bear, he really tried to clean up the mess.

We sometimes point to this story as an example of how even Jesus can get mad. We use his action as an excuse for our own anger. But more likely, Jesus' housecleaning at the Temple can be seen as a symbol of how we need to clean up our own houses. It is a stark warning against any and every false sense of security we have attached to our life of faith. It is a challenge for us to inspect with white gloves each misplaced allegiance, each religious presumption, each pathetic excuse, each smug moment of self-satisfaction. These are the tables in the temple of our heart that Jesus would overturn.

Sometimes it seems as if our lives have gotten to be such a mess that we are unable to find the presence of the divine that lies underneath it all. Sometimes our concern with building a case for our own righteousness clouds the concern we are supposed to have for one another. Sometimes our faith is so embedded with its rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God.

Perhaps we have started out with good intentions, professing to honor God with our lives, with each word and deed. But things have tended to get a bit untidy as life got complicated. The dust has piled up so slowly on our relationship with God as we have neglected our faith for more worldly priorities. Our quest for pleasure and comfort has covered up what is real and what is lasting. Our human relationships have failed because cobwebs have muted the spark of God's love that brought such relationships into being in the first place.

Like our messy bedrooms or our messy work desks, perhaps we haven't noticed the dirt piling up. It has build up slowly. The longer we live with it, the easier it becomes to live with. The longer we live with it, the harder it is to clean up. However the truth is that our messes devalue things of great worth. Faith is not a convenience. It is a commitment.

Our church is holding a rummage sale in just a couple of weeks. I mention this not to compare the tables of clothing and trinkets to the tables of the moneychangers. I don't think we will be selling any animals for sacrifice. I mention the rummage sale because it helps remind me that it is time for a good spring cleaning at home. It is time to clean out the closet and sort through the basement, to take out those things we no longer use, those items which are now just in the way, those things which are not useful any longer in defining who we really are.

And Lent is a season to do likewise in a spiritual housecleaning. It is a time to uncover and nurture our God-given purpose. It is a time to step away from our everyday routine and to do what we need to bring us closer to God's intention for our lives. It is time to reorder our priorities and understand that God comes first in every area of our life. It is time to realize that God is best reflected in the words we use and the actions we take. It is time to truly honor our relationships because the very image of God lies in those we love.

It is time to clean house. It is time to pick up the mess and dust off every nook and cranny inside our hearts and minds and souls. It is time to polish up what is holy deep down within each of us. It is time to be what God wants us to be.