

Exodus 20: 1-17
I Corinthians 1: 18-25
John 2: 13-22

Cleansing House
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When I lived in New York City, years ago, there was a historic old stone church at the end of the block: a gothic structure owned by the Episcopal Church called “The Church of the Holy Communion. By the time I came to live on the block, it had been deconsecrated and sold. It became a disco called “Limelight”: a “re-purposed” structure. Now it’s a mini-mall. I’m not kidding. If you drive around Vermont, you will pass many beautiful churches in our many beautiful small villages. At least, some of them are churches, with worshipping congregations. Some of them are lovely historic buildings, that are closed, or only open in the summer, or that have been sold for other purposes. They have become community centers, or art galleries, or B&B’s. Most people don’t want to tear them down. They do have historic value. They just do not have congregations in them.

It is good for us to remember that people have not always worshipped in buildings like this one. Moses and the newly liberated Hebrews worshipped God on a mountain. Paul and his fellow fledgling Christians worshipped in each other’s houses. When they could, Jews of Jesus’ time worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem, but they also gathered to worship in synagogues and around dining room tables. Some people say that we are living in a post-Christian era, that “Christendom” is a thing of the past. Vermont and New Hampshire are in the vanguard of that point of view, by the way, as the “least religious” states in the Union. Some would say that our ways of encountering the divine are a historical curiosity: that gothic stone buildings might as well be used to entertain and to make money. Some would go farther, and say that Christianity is an active blight on human society, a harmful influence on politics and personal relations. But here we all are, you and me, sitting in a church listening to someone read the 10 commandments, and read about God’s wisdom and human foolishness, and someone else read about Jesus in Jerusalem. It seems to me that we should have a good reason to be here, listening to those words, praying our prayers, singing our songs. We should understand where we are coming from, and what we have inherited, so that when we approach the divine (whatever we think that means) we can do so with intention and integrity. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want our worship to be an artifact or a relic of the past. Even though this building would make a lovely historic site. That’s not why I am here.

We visit the past in our reading of Scripture, but we do not try to recreate it. We turn to Scripture to find meaning and renewal of relationship – relationship with the Divine (whatever that means), with each other, with society, with the troubled and beautiful earth - with all the movement and change implied in relationships. Whatever you want to believe about the Exodus story and the leadership of Moses, it is in this narrative that we find an enormous leap of insight about relationships. Against a background of the miraculous - burning bushes and plagues, and parting seas and food in the desert and fiery pillars, things that make a cracking good story – we find a profound shift. The crowning theophany, the ultimate display of who God is, happens through the giving of 10 words or 10 duties or 10 obligations. It turns out that it matters, in approaching God, how we approach other human beings. A huge insight. And when God introduces these “commandments” God reminds the people of their own experience of pain and dysfunction: “the house of slavery” in Egypt. They are done with that house. That’s in the past. But because they

know that pain, they can live differently. In devotion to the God of liberation, they leave behind lesser gods, lesser idols, lesser names. The former slaves – those who had been beaten down by their work - lift up a day of rest as a holy thing: a holy thing for everyone, not just for some...a human right, if you will.

Then the people who had lived in the house of slavery, where relationships are controlled by the slave-owners, hear that relationships are lifted up as having holy value. Relationships between parent and child, between husband and wife, and between neighbors – these are the settings where devotion to God is expressed. When covenant - a relationship-forming agreement – is made between divinity and humanity, we open up all our human interactions to blessing. Our living and our worship become congruent. This was the flash of insight on Sinai. It did not require a Temple or a Church building to make this tangible. It could be expressed in any setting, in all settings. A fresh wind was sweeping through the community, opening up space for blessing to come in.

Human beings have a way of leaving the desert, where those winds blow so freely. We settle down and build towns and cities and places of worship. We like comfort and stability. We remember that Exodus story, we enshrine those insights in text and art. Spaces are created where those insights are expounded and reinforced. They become carved in stone. The bright covenant of blessing and freedom is boxed in a splendid package. But the original intention, the liberation and the fluidity we need to remain faithful actors in the covenant relationship, may be lost. This is a danger inherent in religious activity, and we need to have our eyes open to it.

John's Gospel gives us a story near the beginning of Jesus' ministry that highlights the dangers in human systems of worship. It says that "the Passover of the Jews was near," that time when people were reminded of slavery and freedom, of God's power and love, of the lasting covenantal relationship. Jesus, along with many other pilgrims, made his way to the Temple in Jerusalem, recently rebuilt by King Herod and his sons. But he does not, as so many faithful people did, shop for unblemished sacrificial animals in the outer courtyards of the Temple, or change his currency from a Roman coin to a Temple shekel. Everyone else seemed fine with these arrangements. Of course the people selling animals charged a premium: that's what the market would bear when one's religious duty required animal sacrifice of some sort. Of course the money-changers had high rates: it wasn't their fault that the Temple rules said that no coin with a human image on it could come into the inner courts where offering were taken. They were facilitating worship, in fact. The corruption and exploitation that went on every day made things hard for the poorer worshippers, but...that's life.

But, no, not according to Jesus. To him, the essential covenant relationships had been broken by these practices. He goes on a rampage, so unlike his usual kindness and forbearance with lepers and prostitutes and even tax collectors. Naturally, people asked Jesus for a "sign" or something that gave him justification for this behavior. With one of his usual enigmatic, non-sequitur answers, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." With the usual misunderstanding, the people listening apply his words to the Temple building. Not such a strange thing: even his disciples did not grasp this teaching until after the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body.

What can we make of this equation – the temple with Jesus' body? Clearly there is criticism for the way things were, the business as usual of an established religion. Worship had become transactional rather than relational: the temple building, "my Father's house," had become a

marketplace. Jesus wants to re-locate, to realign the approach to God. He calls attention to himself, the human life lit up with God's presence, as an avenue to the divine. And it's not just his earthly life, his physical body, but the ongoing effect of that lifetime in the Church, sometimes called the Body of Christ. The ongoing effect of that lifetime, resounding through the centuries, compelling, curious, angry, comforting, compassionate. Just like our relationships with those we love. It's about humans living rightly with other humans, not about the structure.

We'd like to think of this cleansing of the Temple, this house-cleansing, as a simplification, a neatening up of a messy situation, like when I try straighten out the utensil drawer in the church kitchen. I wonder if it's the opposite. I wonder if we are freeing up a space for the Holy Spirit to blow in, and that can get even messier. There go our ideas about the separation of religious and secular life. There go our preconceptions about what this building is for, out the window. There go our time-honored methods of charitable giving, out the other window. In the swept-clean, cleared-out space we find each other, fellow pilgrims on the road from the house of slavery to somewhere new. Fellow pilgrims bound in an animating covenant around the life and the death and the resurrected life of a man who was so full of love that he got angry. He was so full of power that he became humble. He was so full of justice that he overflowed with mercy and compassion. That's not a structure. That's not simple. It's so messy that we have to spend the rest of our lives trying to figure it out and live faithfully to it.

In this season of Lent, we can take a broom to the rooms of our souls, looking for cobwebs, looking for what needs recycling and reusing, getting ready for the Spirit of God to blow in.

I am going to close with a poem from the medieval poet Rumi:

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all
even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture.
Still treat each guest honorably,
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*