

Cleansing the Chaos and the Clutter

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, March 8, 2020)

The God of Love within me greets and honors the God of Love within you.

Friends, today, we have entered the passion of Jesus through the lens of the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. The account of the cleansing of the Temple occurs in all four gospels. This morning we focus on the story from the Gospel of John, a dramatic and evocative story that uses symbolism as a teaching tool to help the Johannine Christians to understand what it meant to be Christian.

We have heard the story, but let's look behind the scene to glean what we can learn about its message for both the 1st century Christians and for us today. We start by focusing on the Temple, considering both the physical and spiritual aspects of it. I am using the description from Amy-Jill Levine's book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*.

The Temple is enormous; the size of 12 soccer fields end to end. Inside the Temple are many Courts. "The inner sanctum, known as the "Holy of Holies" is where the high priest enters, but only on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement." Outside this court are several other courts designated for particular activities or people, such as the Court of Women. The outer court, the Court of Gentiles, is where all the activity happens, the buying and the selling.

In Jesus' day, the Temple served many purposes. "It was a house for prayer; it was the site of three pilgrimage festivals of the Passover; it was a national bank, and it was the only place in the Jewish world where sacrifices could be offered."

People traveled for miles to be part of the Feast of Passover during which they could worship at the Temple and offer their sacrifices. They could not bring with them the animals or birds they wished to sacrifice for fear that they either might be consumed along the way or become injured because only pure birds or animals could be sacrificed. The Court of Gentiles was the designated area in which enterprising vendors could sell their animals and birds as well as other products that visitors might wish to buy.

The Temple was not like what we know as a church, “a place of quiet and decorum.” Among other things, it was a tourist attraction, crowded and noisy, especially during the Passover. The outer court served as a gathering place for people to exchange their wares, to reconnect with family and friends, eat meat rather than fish, and stay connected with fellow Jews.

Considering how large the Temple was and how busy the court was, we see that Jesus upsetting a few tables likely would go unnoticed by most people and his actions would not make a big difference. He did not disrupt all business; his actions were more symbolic than practical, allowing the Gospel writer to create a teaching moment.

The Gospel of John depicts Jesus full of anger, driving people out of the Court of Gentiles, along with their animals. In this story, Jesus is quite aggressive in his reaction, and we might wonder why he was so angry. Levine suggests that Jesus was not mad at the business activities and he did not hate the Temple. He calls it his father's house, and there is no indication that people were being exploited by Temple activities.

Jesus' aggressive anger is symbolic of the deep conflictual relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles at that time, and it is also symbolic of the anger and frustration of the Gentile people. Typical of Jesus, he was passionate about calling into question the attitudes of people and religious leaders who disenfranchised and alienated others. The Temple was a place to connect with one's spirit; it was a house of prayer for everyone, men, women, slaves, poor people, free people, Jews, and Gentiles. Everyone was supposed to feel welcome, yet this was not the case.

The Court of Gentiles, the place where the buying and the selling occurred, was supposed to be an area in which the Gentiles could worship and pray. They were not allowed to enter other Courts to worship. According to Jewish religious rule, there were boundaries not to be crossed concerning the Gentiles. Here we see the Gentiles denied the right to a quiet, safe place to worship and pray. I suspect this infuriated Jesus, who taught a new commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus' risked challenging a faith tradition that did not love all people equally.

The Gospel writer takes the Temple symbol from the physical to the spiritual. Perhaps the essential message of the story is Jesus' statement, "I will destroy the temple that is made with hands, and in three days, I will build another, not made with hands." The Gospel of John was written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, and the first Christian communities would have known this. While the followers of Jesus still worshipped in their homes and places of worship, what had become an essential part of their faith was the knowledge that Jesus' body was now for them a new temple.

In this temple, the Body of Christ, God's love extends to all; no boundaries exist that exclude others. The message for the Johannine Christian community is that they are the Body of Christ, the temple of God. In this temple, everyone has equal access to God's love, everyone is valued, and everyone is welcome.

According to Paul, every person's body was the temple of the Holy Spirit; the human body is in the image and likeness of the divine, therefore the body is both human and divine, the house of God. Therefore, we see Christ in each other and treat each other accordingly.

This story draws attention to our church. "Is our church a house of prayer for all people, or just for people who look like us, walk like us, and talk like us? Do we have boundaries that others cannot cross? How do we make people feel welcome? Is the stranger made to feel welcome? When we pass the peace, do we make eye contact? Is our church busy with the doing of business, or with the task of enhancing our spiritual lives?"

For me, there is one more step. Before we can honour the Christ Spirit in others and love our neighbours, we must connect with and accept that same spirit within ourselves. The house of God, our inner temple, is so cluttered with the busy lives we live that often we are unable to connect with the Christ centre, the Holy of Holies.

Imagine the Court of Gentiles again. It was a noisy, busy, and frantic place. One could not hear over the cacophony of animal noises and vendors yelling. People pushing and shoving, coins flying, hands grabbing, people shouting. How can a person possibly worship in such a place?

In many ways, our busy, overwhelming lives mirror the Court of the Gentiles. The sad reality is that our lives are overwhelmingly cluttered and noisy with busyness, so there is no space left for worship, for settling, for being still. We seem to be doing more and more in less and less time. Many of us work, drive, talk, think, and eat on the go. The rise of social media and smartphones has catapulted us into a world that pulls us further and further away from the Holy of Holies.

In this demanding, consumer orientated, media-drenched, data-rich, channel- and computer-surfing age, all the chaos and clutter leave no space for abiding in our divine temple. All the things that make life worth living and feed our spiritual centre – church community, family, faith, friendship – thrive on the one thing we do not have enough of: time.

The clutter and chaos of this life so disconnect us from our spiritual centre that we stop enjoying life, get stressed out, and anxious. We forget to laugh and have fun and how to be present in the moment so as not to miss unexpected opportunities.

Jesus stormed through the Court of Gentiles because he knew that people hungered for an encounter with people and with a God who loved them and valued them. Today we hunger for something more significant than our busy and overstuffed lives. We long to slow the pace, to reconnect, to play and enjoy life, and to live lives that are not accelerating out of control. We long to evolve into higher expressions of compassion and love. But to do this, we must cleanse the busyness, clear the temple, to create space so that we can be free to reconnect with all that feeds our spirit.

In this series, the story of Jesus cleansing the temple occurs during Lent. The season of Lent affords for us the opportunity to engage the spiritual practice of cleansing the clutter and chaos as steps toward freeing ourselves from the mayhem of the world. It takes risk and courage to overturn the busyness in our lives so that we might see more clearly what is essential and make room for quiet contemplation.

Clearing the clutter and chaos of this busy life enables us to create the space in which we can sincerely practise what Jesus was so passionate about in his ministry: loving our neighbours, being accepting and forgiving, being open-minded, and remaining realistic in a world that so

easily blinds us to what is real; what is real is peace, love, joy, well-being, and human connections.

Cleansing the clutter and the chaos is a choice to decide that you will no longer engage in a life that is out of control and focus instead on what you can control. Overturning the tables of busyness creates space for fresh beginnings, enabling the doors of brand-new opportunities to open and being attentive to the rebirth pulsing in us, the love and goodness that is within, even if still hidden at times.

The Venerable Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah said, “If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace.”

This Lent may we have the courage to overturn the clutter and chaos in our inner temples and, in so doing, enable us to slow the pace, calm our lives, change our perspective, and pay attention to all that really matters in life. May this be so for us all.