

Title: Spiritual House Cleaning

Subtitle: The challenge and call to be holy.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/-jnXn5vtj3k>

As usual, our Sunday readings for this season of Lent have directed us toward challenging spiritual issues that require soul-searching and spiritual discernment. Today's Gospel features Jesus cleansing the Temple. The disciples were puzzled by this event and didn't understand its meaning until years later, when Christ was raised from the dead. Then "they remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'"¹ So, if you struggle or even react to some of its implications, you are not alone.

Religious zeal has always been a topic that incites caution. A lot of religious shenanigans and harmful, judgmental activities have taken place in the name of religious reform that should have been tempered with wisdom and forethought. I will never forget coming home from college with a newfound faith that puzzled everyone in my family. My brother Bill said, "Steve, you are either crazy, or you really have something." My mom wasn't so sure. One day, as I was trying to explain my newfound faith to her, she stopped me dead in my tracks and blurted out, "I think you're just a religious snob." There was no one on earth who I respect more than my mom. So immediately, I apologized, and said, "I am so sorry. I had no idea I came across so arrogantly. Later, my mom admitted, "You didn't realize it, but you made me feel guilty when you talked about having a personal relationship with God, and right now, I don't think I have one." Later, she came to faith. So even with all of my obvious flaws, my newfound faith upset the status quo.

¹ John 2:17, The verse that they remembered came from Psalm 69:9

When Jesus made a whip and drove the animals and money changers out of the Temple, he also upset the status quo. He made the religious leaders who were responsible for the situation look bad, and they would never forgive him for it. From that point on, opposition followed Jesus wherever he went.

The incident, as a whole, was not a picture of a meek and mild Jesus, nor is it a picture of Jesus that many prefer to hold dear. The event is covered in all four Gospels. John's version occurred at the beginning of his ministry, and the Synoptics depict a second cleansing at the end, the day after the Triumphal entry. At that point, "The chief priests, scribes, and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him."²

For us, the cleansing of the Temple is a sign with deep personal and spiritual significance. Jesus is going to put his finger on things that get in the way of seeing and experiencing the glory of God, even if it makes us uncomfortable.

I will never forget the story about a man with a wart on his nose that he ignored for years until his grandchild innocently climbed up on his lap, put her finger on the wart, and asked, "Grandpa, what is that?" As a result of that very innocent encounter, that man decided to have that wart removed.

As we look again at our Gospel story, the dilemma in the Temple courts started quite innocently. The buying and selling of animals for worship was needed because people traveling from long distances couldn't bring with them the animals acceptable for sacrifice. The money changers were also necessary because the Roman coins had Caesar's image stamped on them with an inscription that declared that Caesar was God. Devote Jews believed the coins were too tainted with idolatrous implications to be associated with the worship of a Holy God.

² Luke 19:47b

Therefore, it was necessary to exchange Roman currency with temple coins.

So, the practice Jesus encountered in the Temple courts was a good thing allowed in the wrong place. Moreover, the practice caused such commotion, with the sights and sounds of sheep, oxen, doves, and everything else that goes with them. There was huckstering, bartering, and haggling over the weight of a coin, and the commotion that resulted must have made it hard to think, much less pray.

When Jesus saw what was going on and how hard it was to worship in a place like this, he vehemently objected and cried out, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers.’”³

As I reflect on what this means to us, I can see how there are times when you have to separate the secular from the sacred in order to allow yourself space to worship. The Psalmist describes the Temple of the Lord as holy.⁴ It was intended to be a place that was “...none other than the gate of heaven and the household of God.”⁵ But finding that sacred space is not easy. Lenten disciples never are. They aim to clear the clutter and spiritual distractions from our lives. They take to heart the words of Malachi, “Behold the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His Temple; and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.”⁶ The image Malachi uses stresses both its thoroughness and its severity. The heat of the refiner’s fire was so intense that it separated the dross from the molten pure metal. So, how might you separate the secular from the sacred in your heart? And what spiritual aids and means of grace do you need for such a task?

³ Mark 11:17

⁴ Psalm 11:4

⁵ Genesis 28:17

⁶ Malachi 3:2-3

Our Old Testament lesson and Psalm call us to use the Ten Commandments as a plumbline for self-examination. The Catechism in our Prayer Book tells us they “were given to define our relationship with God and our neighbor.”⁷

The cleansing of the Temple is, therefore, a sign. A sign that calls us to examine the courtyards of our lives to see if there is any offensive way in us.

When the Prophet Malachi asked, “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”⁸ The cleansing work he describes is like Fuller’s soap, which contains strong lye. Then, after being washed, the clothes would be placed on rocks and beaten with sticks. For this reason, “Lent is not a time for light dusting. It’s time for heavy-duty scrubbing.”⁹ Its disciplines aim to clear away anything hindering us from worshiping the Father in Spirit and truth. And when the disciplinary ordeal causes discomfort, we have his promise that it will be for a good purpose: “The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.”¹⁰

So, let’s not lose sight of the fact that God is holy, and he is calling us to be holy. You and I serve a God who loves us so much that, when necessary, he will overturn everything that prevents us from knowing and loving him. He will overturn tables, crosses, graves, and stumbling stones to remove anything that obstructs us from seeing his glory and enjoying unhindered fellowship with him.

So, let’s ask God to make us healthier, happier, and holier as we allow him to do his work. Amen.

⁷ BCP, Catechism, p. 848

⁸ Malachi 3:2

⁹ Quote by David Sellery in his Message for Lent, 2021

¹⁰ Isaiah 32:17