

## ***Cleaning House***

In the name of him who cleansed the temple, dear friends in Christ: I did a little calculating, and I figured out that in the 15 years prior to coming here to serve as pastor of St. Paul, we (Karol and I) moved 12 times. On average that's a move every 15 months. And each move required us to physically put our hands on everything we owned and ask, "Do we still need this? Do we really want to take this with us?" As a result, a lot of unnecessary stuff got thrown away or was donated to charity or was otherwise gotten rid of. That hasn't been the case for the last nearly 20 years. We haven't moved, so we haven't had to make those decisions. Result? Stuff piles up. We tell ourselves, this could be useful, or we might need this again, or this still has value even if it's only sentimental value, or I'll get around to fixing this one day, or whatever. If we have room to keep it, we do. But precisely how many empty cottage cheese containers does one actually need? More recently, we've recognized this accumulation of things to be a problem. We're trying to change. And though it might not be apparent to the casual observer wandering through the place, in the past month and a half we've gotten rid of a lot of stuff that we just don't need anymore.

Something similar happens in the Church over time, and not just with physical items of property; it happens also with doctrines, teachings, traditions, and practices. What begin as somebody's supposedly good ideas or that are at least well intended even if they're not quite right eventually harden into standard belief and practice. They take on a life and purpose of their own. And through process of continual accretion of such things piling up steadily and inexorably, they can cloud, overshadow, and obscure the Church's true message and purpose.

That's what happened in the years leading up to the earthly ministry of Jesus. On one hand you had the sort of legalism that was embodied by the Pharisees. Instead of focusing on God's grace and how he forgave sins in light of the sacrifices of atonement that were offered on the altar, the major emphasis gradually shifted to perfect obedience to the letter of a strict and incredibly detailed legal code that was designed to keep you within the boundaries of the Law. Follow all these rules, and you're sure to please God. And because the rules addressed outward actions rather than the thoughts and attitude of the heart behind them, they were actually doable. They were possible to obey. And that in turn fed the pride of the sinful ego. Through such mechanistic obedience you could show yourself to be righteous in the sight of God; or at very least, better than almost everyone else.

On the other hand abuses in the worship practices had been piling up. The way people used to worship back then was to bring their sacrificial animals to the temple in Jerusalem. It was the only place you could do it. And these animals had to be inspected by the priests to ensure they were free of blemish or defect. Somewhere along the line, somebody got the bright idea to sell sacrificial animals right there in Jerusalem, that way people coming in from all over the country or from abroad wouldn't have to bring their own. It helped the city folks too: they didn't raise their own animals. So it was a matter of convenience. Ah, but after a while they figured out how to make more money at it. If I'm selling animals for sacrifice I want to be able to guarantee they'll pass the priests' inspection. So I get them certified in advance – by slipping the priests a bribe. And funny thing, over time it became impossible to bring your own animal from home for sacrifice. No matter how perfect it was, it couldn't pass the priests inspection. You had to buy one already preapproved – at a hugely inflated price, of course. The scam just

kept growing from there. Soon everybody all the way up to the high priest had their finger in this pie.

And naturally, the best place to sell these animals was close to the temple – the closer the better, “for the convenience of the customer”. Then someone thought, “Hey, why don’t we sell the animals in the temple itself? We could use the outer court, the one for the Gentiles, because after all, we don’t like Gentiles anyway. It’s wasted space”. And as you might guess, if you wanted to set up your operation on the temple court, you paid dearly for the privilege. More bribes. More dirty money. Higher cost to the customer. The whole thing was a full blown racket – and that’s just for the animals. You also had to buy special temple coins to make financial offerings and these too were sold for super-inflated prices.

Now, there’s no question that this accumulated legalism and the mountains of corruption in the temple were bad in their own right; but what made them worse was their devastating effect on people’s souls. The first either filled people with sinful pride thinking they were righteous on their own, or crushed them with despair because they knew they didn’t measure up. The second taught people to despise and mistrust the very priests whose job it was to offer sacrifices and to declare God’s forgiveness for their sins. The Lord’s house was a total mess, and souls were being destroyed because of it.

So it is that we see Jesus doing some necessary house cleaning. A big part of his ministry was confronting and correcting the legalistic teaching of the Pharisees and those who thought like them. “It’s not the healthy who need a doctor” he said “but those who are sick. I’ve not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” And he showed again and again that even the most outwardly righteous person is a sinful beggar in the sight of God – a sinful beggar who can only plead for mercy—which God is only too happy to bestow.

In this evening’s Gospel we see Jesus dealing with the other problem: the corrupt marketing in the temple. Here his teaching point is reinforced with violent action as he physically drives the sellers and their wares from the temple court. He rightly calls them thieves and robbers. One of the evangelists who recorded this event says that when the disciples witnessed Jesus explode in fury like he did over the abuses taking place in the temple, they remembered the passage of Scripture which says of the Messiah, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” It’s true: Jesus is very much concerned that the teaching of his Church be correct, and that its worship and practice be right and free of any hint of corruption. He wants to keep the Lord’s house clean, uncluttered, and operating as it should for the purpose of saving sinners.

Which brings us to the time of the Reformation, when the same two problems were plaguing the Church: legalism and corruption. Again, they weren’t things that happened overnight or all at once, but that developed slowly over time. But by the dawn of the sixteenth century the house of the Lord could have been featured on that television show called *Hoarders*. Yes, it was that bad.

The presentation of Christ as the merciful Savior who in love died for the sins of the world had been replaced by an angry and resentful Jesus who was looking to avenge himself on sinners. His wrath could only be placated by prescribed outward acts of piety and prayers for intercession to the saints and most especially to his mother, Mary. And to get them to pray for you, even *their* favor had to be earned by doing things like venerating their relics or going on a pilgrimage or making a contribution to a convent or monastery. I’m only scratching the surface here, but the whole thing was far more legalistic than the Pharisees ever dreamed of.

And then there was the corruption. It seemed there was nothing that wasn't for sale. Money bought offices in the church. Pay the right price and you could be a priest, a bishop, a cardinal, or even the Pope. Money bought masses: you could hire a priest to consecrate the elements for Holy Communion a hundred times in a row and all by himself alone. The thought was that each time he did it earned more merit before God either for you or for someone else you designated. And money bought God's forgiveness. That's what the sale of indulgences was all about. Again, I could go on with dozens of other abuses, but that would take all night. The point is that the house of the Lord was a cluttered mess and souls were being destroyed because of it. The time was long past overdue for a thorough house cleaning.

That's what the Reformation was: a cleaning away of the accumulated clutter that was overshadowing, clouding, and distorting the true Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus. And more than anything what I'd have you see is that it was Jesus who did the house cleaning. We often give credit to Luther and the other reformers, but it was Jesus who gave them the wisdom, the insight, the courage, the boldness, and most importantly the Spirit to do the work.

That work goes on even today. And to equip us to carry on this work of Jesus to clean house, in our evening services this Lententide, we'll be reviewing the "sola's" of the Reformation: faith alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, God's glory alone, and finally on Good Friday the cross alone. These will keep our focus on what's truly important and need to be kept in Christ's Church, and help us to discern what is not useful or necessary and that need to be thrown away.

May the Lord bless our Lenten journey together and enrich us with his truth and grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***