

Cleaning House

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 7, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. Making 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 moneychangers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The [Jewish leaders] then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The [Jewish leaders] then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After 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. (John 2:13-22, NRSV)

Have any of you started your Spring cleaning yet? I know that we at the Buchanan ranch have some to do, with a lot of it involving the boxes that have cluttered our garage for some time now. They contain some junk that just needs to be thrown out, but other things that we need and thought we lost, or *would* want but don't even remember we have! Until all that gets done, we'll never know exactly what we have hidden away, and of course, our garage can't go back to being a proper garage.

We at Friendship are now well into the journey of the Lenten season – a season of self-examination, certainly, but not just of ourselves as individuals, but also as a congregation ... as a community. It's a time in which we are called to "clean house" ... do some Spring cleaning ... in preparation for a divinely prepared renewal, rebirth, and transformation. It's a time for getting rid of some junk in our lives and in our life together that we're better off without. But it's also a time to re-discover gifts ... to recover callings ... we have long neglected and forgotten.

I think it's telling that one of our gospel lectionary passages for this season is John's account of Jesus entering the Temple in Jerusalem and overturning the tables of the moneychangers. Now there's some "cleaning house"! The heading over this passage in my own Bible describes this scene as "Jesus Cleansing the Temple": Kicking out the junk and straightening things up, but also *liberating* the place to be what it was always meant to be – not a marketplace racket consumed with its own survival, but *God's* house ... a house of prayer for all nations ... a space from which the Spirit of life and love and freedom sweeps out into the world.

As I ponder this provocative story, I'm haunted by a question that I can't let go of: What would it mean for us as the Church today to follow our Lord's lead into sacred space and "clean house" in our own time? What would it look like for us to do as Jesus did and overturn some

tables and unsettle the status quo, all in the name of a God who has no patience for pious distractions or institutional games ... for anything less than justice?

This question came home to me in a unique way this past week on Zoom as I participated in my monthly ministry cohort group. It's an opportunity for support and ideas and growth, and especially as this pandemic has lingered on, it has come to mean a lot to me. We had a speaker with us last week who was both inviting and compelling on one hand, and deeply disturbing to settled habits of mind on the other.

He asked us to engage in a simple exercise: To think of the greatest problems facing our own congregations and to name them out loud. As with any such open question, and especially one that would lay bare a bit of own vulnerability, voiced responses were slow in coming at first, but then as one or two of our group spoke, others followed. The answers we offered would not likely surprise you:

- *We don't have the number of members that we used to.*
- *We aren't attracting and retaining visitors.*
- *We create programs that we think will be interesting, but then not many people come to them.*
- *We have conflict in our congregation, and we can't seem to overcome it.*

As I said, the answers wouldn't surprise you. But what probably *would* surprise you – in the moment, it shook us a bit! – was what our speaker told us next. He understood that all these things are real problems, and that they don't have easy fixes. But he said, "Here's the thing: For the people *out there* ... the people you hope to reach and attract and enroll into membership and then put on a committee ... those people *don't care* about your problems. *They don't care about your problems.*"

That was jarring to hear when put so bluntly, but then evoked some embarrassed laughter with the recognition of plain truth. It struck us with the force of revelation: That what we might regard as the biggest problems facing our congregations *don't* matter one bit to the people that presumably are the solution to those problems! That our unspoken message to the community at large is "Please come help us with our low membership" ... "Please come and help bail us out of our financial woes" ... "Come and bring some new blood into our church so we don't fight so much."

It all sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it? But that was the point: Our focus is in the wrong place. It's not that lower membership or having trouble with attracting and keeping visitors or enduring conflict are not real problems. Of course, they are. But when our primary focus is on the maintenance and survival of the organization and not on the *mission* for which the organization was organized in the first place, then we've lost the plot.

The most urgent questions facing the church today are not about institutional survival, but about *identity* and *purpose* and *calling*: *Who are we? Why are we here?*

This may sound very simple, but these questions, taken to heart, involve a complete re-framing of the real issue. If we see our core problems as membership and money and participation, then there's no real difference between us and a friendly community club that hopes to attract a few more people to help keep it going for a while ... whose purpose is to provide some enrichment and fellowship and perhaps some meaning and direction in an uncertain world.

And by "we" and "us," I'm talking both about the American mainline church in general *and* our own congregation, because just like me and my ministry colleagues in the cohort, we're all in the same boat. We're all facing the same cultural tides, and we've all been experiencing the same difficulties that impact congregational effectiveness and viability.

But what if we look again? What if we discern our most significant problems, not from the perspective of survival, but rather from the perspective of *who we truly are* in Jesus Christ, and what our purpose truly is in light of his claim on our lives?

What if our *biggest* problem is that we haven't seen our *community's* biggest problems as our own? What if our biggest problem is that we're asking the Spirit to bless our efforts, but are *not* asking where the Spirit is moving ... not asking where the brokenness is ... where the injustice is ... where cries for healing and reconciliation are daily been raised to Heaven?

Is it systemic, generational poverty within our reach? Is it structural racism that infects our larger community's experience of what it means to be an American? Is it illiteracy and the lack of quality education and opportunity for so many near us? Is it loneliness and a sense of isolation among a sizeable portion of our older neighbors? Is it food insecurity – the alarming fact that children and adults within only a few miles of us go hungry every day?

The answers will be different for each community and each congregation, but they are essential towards discerning what faithfulness to our identity and purpose in Christ looks like in *our* time, *our* place, because our faith teaches us that it is in those broken places where *Christ* is to be found. And where Christ is, there is the hope of new life.

This doesn't mean that we should try to be all things to all people, and we help no one if we spread ourselves too thin and try in vain to address every need. But as Oscar Romero once said, "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well."

We will explore what all this may mean for us, for Friendship, as we journey further this Lent – as we "clean house" and recover a renewed passion for this adventure to which we are called.

In one of his most stirring prayers, the great George MacLeod (1895-1991) – the Presbyterian minister, prophet, and visionary, moderator of the Church of Scotland, founder of the Iona Community – petitions to Christ for help in figuring how to be the church in a changing day. He

confesses that we have spent too much time making the church, as he puts it, an “institute,” knowing in our gut that God wants the church to be so much more. This is the prayer -

*We are living in a changing day, Lord;
all the old rules and regulations for living
are slithering to the ground.
And You lived in a changing day, Lord:
all the old rules and regulations of the scribes and Pharisees
were slithering to the ground.
But it was Your custom to go to the temple:
to the noisome temple
sometime to the scandalized temple
listening to the mumbo jumbo,
but it was Your custom to go
till the new temple of Your body was available for [us].*

*Give us your grace in our changing day
To stand by the temple that is the present church.
The noisome temple
the sometime scandalized temple
that is the present church,
listening sometime to what again seems mumbo jumbo.
Make it our custom to go
till the new outline of Your Body for our day
becomes visible in our midst.*

*In the temple You healed, Lord Christ:
despite the noise and scandal, You healed.
And we are Your body even today.
You have no hands but our hands
no feet but our feet;
ours are the eyes with which You look out
compassionate on the world.*

*You have ordained that You just don't come
except through us.
Give us faith in great healings
despite the noise and scandal of our modern dimness.
Your grace and power are such:
none can ever ask too much.
Heal again, even through us,
for so You have ordained:
till the new outline of Your body
becomes visible in our midst.*

*In the temple You threw out the money changers, Lord Christ:
down the steps and out of the door –
and into the vacant aisles came the children
shouting for joy and dancing round.
Too often we are the money changers:
giving short change in spiritual things
to many who seek the true coin:
making the Church an institute
when you want it to be a chaos of uncalculating love.
Drive out from our hearts
our calculated offerings,
our easy responses,
and let child-like faith
flood into us again.
Grant us such abandon, of Your grace alone,
that we too shall be made strong
to go outside the city wall
outside holiness
and die in the bloody mess of another Calvary
that the Church at home may live again.*

To the glory of God! Amen.