

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Cleansing and Clarity*

John 2

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Today's gospel reading points our way back to center if we've strayed from the path that is God's way for God's people to live in God's world. The story of Jesus cleansing the temple is a passage to hold close, especially in the season of Lent, a season which returns our hearts to the worship and love of God amidst all the clutter, distraction, and compromised allegiances that swirl around life. When we stray, we learn there is a way back in mercy, though it may be a severe mercy.

God's severe mercy in our gospel reading takes the shape of a whip of cords that Jesus fashions together by his own hand. He enters the temple complex and uses the whip to drive out all the people selling cattle, sheep, and doves for sacrifices and the money changers seated at their tables. "Take these things away; do not make my father's house a house of trade." In the other three gospels, the cleaning of the temple is at the end, between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. It seems to be the last straw for the authorities who move then to arrest, judge, and crucify Jesus.

In John's gospel, the temple cleansing is placed at the beginning, in chapter 2. No one, but maybe John, knows the exact reason why it's in a different place in the 4th gospel, but it seems to me that by telling this story at the beginning, John offers us a lens through which to read the rest of the life and ministry of Jesus. The only story before this one, also in chapter 2, is the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Put these two stories together, they are back-to-back, and a picture emerges: in the disappointment of a feast gone wrong, Jesus takes water and turns it into wine as a sign of the goodness of the kingdom he inaugurates. In the chaos of sacred space gone bad, Jesus not only cleanses the temple but redefines the meeting place of God from the building to his body. "Destroy *this* temple," he says, seeming to point to himself, "and I will raise it up in three days." God's mercy will be severe, and Jesus will bear the cost.

In both cases, Jesus restores delight and purpose when they are in danger of being lost or trampled. Zeal for his father's house fueled his clarity for what life and worship are to be about. And gave him clarity for the future that awaited him, his cross and resurrection.

Everything else in the gospel is made plain in the light of this clarity of purpose. Jesus teaches the kingdom of God has come and so come into God's holy light. He seeks those who have been thrown out of religious spaces, and he heals them and restores them. He takes upon himself all manner of symbolism: I am the bread... the vine... the good shepherd... the gate... the light of the world. "Let not your hearts be troubled," he says, "believe in God, believe also in me."

And so we are called to live in the light of the clarity of God's purpose. Our purpose is not to live our life in pursuit of our own advantage and our own interests but for the glory of God whom we are to love with our whole heart. But, goodness, how do we do that, we might ask? How do we untangle love of God from actions we take, decisions we make, or attitudes we have that fuel our advantage and interests? I think it would be impossibly pious to suggest that this is as simple as being faithful vs. being unfaithful. It's just not that simple. Even the sellers of animals for sacrifice in the temple, even money changers, must have served some purpose originally for all the out-of-town pilgrims, even if that purpose had eventually been made totally corrupted.

Jesus isn't having it, that much is for sure. You've turned a house of prayer into a house of trade, he accuses. These words help us, by helping us see more clearly our need to cleanse our souls of anything and everything that reduces our being to something less than God intended. We realize the danger of making our soul, which is God's dwelling place, a house of trade, by living to satisfy our personal interests instead of generous and supportive love for God and God's people and God's creation. You are a house of prayer. It's always a good time to ask ourselves how that is going for us. Lent is a particularly good season to revisit it.

You are not a teeming mass of productivity and availability for your employer.  
 You are not a swiping, clicking fountain of consumption for the economy.  
 You are not a passive, pliant audience for the schemes of political action committees.  
 You are not a social media entity whose value is registered in likes and clicks.  
 You are not a machine metabolizing cable news into blood pressure.  
 You are not your GPA, SAT, BMI, your credit score, or your SSN.  
 You, your whole being, whole self, in your mind, your heart, your eyes and hands, your body and soul, you are a house of prayer. This is who you are. This is who you are made to be.  
 When we say: take up your cross and lose yourself and find yourself. This is what is being lost and what is being found.

For the rich theological imagination of Alexander Schmemmann, the idea of human beings as houses of prayer becomes human beings who are priests of creation who hold the world like eucharist in our hands and offer it to God in prayer and praise. The human, he says, "stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with [God]. The world was created as the 'matter,' the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man [the human] was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament." (*For the Life of the World*, 22).

Does that vision of the human serving as priest of a cosmic sacrament seem too strange to be true for the ordinary person? Possibly so, but then I was in the grocery store late one Saturday afternoon about the time the work week was finally over for painters and construction workers and road crew workers. I was there to buy bread for our eucharist. They were there to buy food for their families. And they came with their families. I watched

family after family come into the store to do their shopping together. Babies were perched in the shopping cart baby seats watching their parents watch them. These big, tired, callous-handed men only had eyes for their children as they walked into the store. They made goofy faces. They zoomed the carts to waterfalls of giggles. I watched one man dance a jig in work boots if it would make his child laugh. Maybe because I was holding the bread of communion in my hands that I saw the whole scene as eucharistic: In that moment, I saw the bread of life being broken and shared with thanksgiving and easy delight. I saw the water of time being transformed into the wine of joy. I saw the clutter and trudge of daily life being cleansed out as the dusk of the day of rest was beginning.

The whole gospel is about the restoration of our identity as those who hold the world—the piece of it that we hold. The piece of it entrusted into our hands—the tenuous, terrible, beautiful, wounded, and sacred world in our hands and to offer it to God. We don't do this all at once. To hold the world means our lives, our time, our food, what we touch and see, everything, everything in our hearts and heads, in our intentions and our disciplines, in our successes and failures, our work and rest, all offered to God. This is what it means to be a living house of prayer. In God's house, there are many rooms.

The Cleansing of the Temple by Jesus sets in motion a pattern that repeats over and over in Christian life. We begin with great intentions, but then the clutters and distractions and complications of the world and our faith creep in and smother it. Then we have a reckoning, a cleansing of some sort. Sometimes it's a happy return to the way of Christ, a Sabbath restoration that we receive with joy. Sometimes it's painful, repentance and confession and making amends, a long, hard journey to restore a broken relationship. Either way the reckoning is coming.

You can see this all through history. The temple is built with a simple purpose to give glory to God. Then it becomes overrun with other pursuits. And Jesus cleanses it.

The early church begins as a community who responds to Jesus as Lord and Savior then divisions come in, allegiances, alliances, and selfishness. Paul clarifies it, "I decided to know nothing among you but Christ and him crucified" and reminds them of the foolishness and wisdom of the cross.

In later centuries after Christianity was twisted and appropriated by the empire, men and women fled to the desert, not to run away but to run toward God. They got back to the heart of it.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, mendicants like Francis and Dominic rebuilt God's church and they did so through simplicity, joy, sacrifice, and clear-eyed dedication to the way of Jesus.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli reacted to the bloated institutional and corrupt church with the first sparks of reformation. Smyth and Helwys and the early Baptists followed in their steps.

The Pietists and quietists, the Puritans all were part of the same movement in one way or another, begin again, and then begin again. And then, when you're done with that, do it again.

Every church plant I've ever known; every intentional Christian community, every new monastic or emergent church responds to the same instinct. We need to get back to basics, to the foundations, to the beginnings. We need to recover what we've lost. We thirst for good wine, but we'll even take a drop of clean water. We hunger for the feast of God's banqueting table, but we'll even take the simplicity of broken bread.

Phyllis Tickle says every 500 years the church has a yard sale, it drags everything out in the yard, to sift through it and see what needs to be kept and what needs to be relinquished. Benedict and the monastics, the revolutions of the mendicants, the reformations. We are in the era of another yard sale she called the Great Emergence in the rise of postmodernism in an era of post-Christendom. What will we keep? What will we leave behind? These are the great questions for the church universal and for each of us in our own "emergences."

These themes play out on global, epic, and international scales; they also play out in each of our own lives. We come to say we need sacred, we need simple. DaySpring's motto is the motto of restoration movements in the church for 2000 years. And it is an invitation to each of us. Each of us becomes the site of renewal of a house of prayer when we welcome Jesus in to disrupt the easy drift of our lives toward our own interests and restore our love for serving God in all things. This happens when we welcome him in to do this cleansing work. And even if you don't welcome and invite him in, he may come in anyway.

In this Great Lent, may you lose something of yourself, and may you find something of Christ's life in you. May Jesus do some cleansing in your life just where you need it. He knows where that is even if you don't. May his severe mercy be just what you need. And may you rediscover the joy of your sacred, beautiful life in the one who loves you and sent his son just that you may not perish but have eternal life.

Thanks to God. Amen.