

Lent 3
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

March 7, 2021
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Cleansing Temples

Have you ever thought about why we build square houses—well, not square, but based on right angles and straight lines? Experiments with other kinds of organization have been tried, but when it comes down to putting a house together most builders order straight studs and joists, sheathing and drywall. Plans are laid out with right angles in most of the corners—or they are considered "off." Round houses, like what Karisse knew in Africa, just don't cut it here.

You could say it's for efficiency, because squares fit nicely against one another. That's true, but so do hexagons and triangles. Hexagons are really stronger, in fact. And you have to ask the question, "Why do we want rooms and houses that fit nicely against one another?" It's more efficient, yes, but why is efficiency a value for us when it comes to building our homes? Truth be told, we don't really have an answer for that because the more questions you ask the closer you get to the rock-bottom values and assumptions that undergird our culture. Basic values and assumptions don't have reasons that explain them. We just believe them because our culture teaches us to.

We put a lot of stock in those beliefs. We've built a whole construction industry around this concept that buildings are better if they are "square." It's just how it's done. Others might do it in other ways, but when we do it, this is how we do it. And the sheer inertia of the status quo carries us forward without thinking about it. The industry itself becomes kind of a backwards justification for the assumptions and values. We are generally discouraged from asking difficult questions.

Except that religion is about asking questions, and if any part of our society is going to ask the hard questions that dig deep, it's going to be religion. You might say that education is supposed to ask these questions, but that must be qualified. Early education is about building a cultural consensus on how the world works. Later stages of education are invited to challenge those assumptions, at least to a certain degree. All such questions arise from a given set of assumptions. Where did those assumptions come from? We're back to square 1.

Religion claims to ask questions based on something transcendent, that comes from within AND beyond human experience. When a community of faith challenges the status quo, it is on the basis of something from beyond the status quo that we speak. But what happens when we get stuck in lockstep with the cultural systems we believe in without ever going beyond them? If religion is merely a maintainer of the status quo, what divine word can we speak into our world? Nothing. We merely reinforce the systems of society without questioning them from God's point of view. We abdicate the prophetic voice.

So here we have Jesus, walking into the Temple just before the Passover. The Passover is the highest feast day of the year. Jews and proselytes from all over the Roman Empire have converged on Jerusalem to celebrate the story of the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Throughout the Old Testament the word of the Lord to the Israelites beats a constant drumbeat.

"I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."

This theme was to inform their worship, undergird their social structure, and guide their interactions with foreigners. This is the kernel of the story of the Jewish people. Based on that story, a whole system of worship was created and refined over the centuries.

By the time of Jesus, worship required an animal for sacrifice. Worship required a temple tax. Animals were hard to bring if you came from afar, so purchasing them at the temple door was a service that was created to accommodate people. Since Roman coinage had an image of the Emperor on it that was considered idolatrous, temple coinage was required to pay the tax. Since temple coinage was only available in Jerusalem, accommodations were made to change money as well. It had all become quite a little enterprise, all ostensibly to be able to fulfill the requirements of the law regarding temple worship. But where in all that commerce is the great refrain, "I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." Where is the story that informs what it means to be a Hebrew? Where is the prophet who can ask the hard questions about why we really do what we do? Where is God? Where is the prayer?

Onto this scene steps Jesus. He will ask the question in the form of a whip, upended tables and the chaos of loose animals in the temple precincts. He will challenge the way the temple is merely maintaining the status quo without challenging it with hard questions. He will reclaim the prophet's voice and begin his work at home, among his own, at the very center of Jewish life and worship.

Of course, there is pushback. The temple authorities challenge Jesus' right to upend their show. "Show us a sign!" Jesus responds, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in 3 days." The Jewish leadership thought he meant "rebuild." But he said, "raise up." He is not talking about the temple edifice with all its economic system. He is talking about his own body. After his resurrection the disciples think back and say, "Oh, now we understand. 3 days in the tomb and then the resurrection." Their concept of what the temple was has been cleansed.

What does cleansing the temple look like today? Cleansing the temple means challenging some of our too-easily held ideas about church. The Christian temple is not first an edifice with all its economic systems. The temple is found in that place of prayer

that emerges when the people of God gather in Christ's name. The building and all of the systems we use to do “church” are holy because by and in them we gather as the temple. The Christian temple is the Body of Christ that we house in a church building.

So, what about St. Paul’s, here and now? As the Temple, COVID-19 has forced us to rethink worship, along with our siblings around the world. I think we agree that virtual worship is better than nothing, that it actually embraces some benefits strictly in-person worship does not, like greater accessibility to people who cannot come. On the other hand, the embodied nature of our faith craves physical presence. It is one of our central incarnational tenets. The old way has been whipped out from among us by the cords of a disease. What transformed church will emerge? We will gather in person again, but we will carry on with online presence for those who cannot gather with us. We will use the new skills we have been forced to learn extend the boundaries of our community in ways we never imagined.

As the Temple, we continue to find ways to be true to our calling. There was a day when St. Paul’s excelled at feeding the hungry. Now, we are launching One Parish, One Prisoner. The energy that this program has generated among us is truly amazing. The old visions of what our outreach should look like are being sifted. Another form is emerging—just as faithful to our vision of being a people who believe that God is healing and restoring the world and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration, a new kind of temple, perhaps.

27 of us signed up for Small Groups. That is most of our normal Sunday attendance. I have never seen this kind of response to the launch of this kind of ministry in any of my parishes. We have four leaders to begin the groups. We have a program that I will introduce in each one, guidelines that will keep the conversation focused and safe, and the potential of building spiritual community through telling our stories. The tables have been overturned, and we are discovering something new. The old visions of what our community life could look like are being sifted. Another form is emerging—just as faithful to our vision of being a people who believe that God is healing and restoring the world and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration. I can't wait to see what kind of temple this will raise up.

How about you? Where have you lost your grounding? Where have you forgotten your roots? What inertia is carrying you forward without inspiration or joy? The questions really are,

- What money tables need to be upended?
- What dutifully prepared offerings turned lose?

Jesus stands at the door of the temple of your heart, whip in hand. Never fear the chaos—he only means to turn your heart into a temple.