

Lent III Year B: 4/ 5 March 2018  
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
The Rev. Gary Cyr, Rector

## **May this time of Lenten sojourning be one of cleansing our hearts and minds**

Exodus 20:1-17  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
John 2:13-22  
Psalm 19

Early last week, I had the audacity to believe that Spring had arrived. The ground was devoid of snow; snowbanks that had amassed from winter plowing were nearly gone; and Snow Drops, an early spring flower, had bosomed beneath the parish kitchen windows. Then bombogenesis happened and shattered my delusional belief. Alas, when one awakes to a marshmallow world, one simply makes s'mores. At least that's what I desired to do Friday morning!

The notion I had while I lived in my delusional world of spring being upon us, is that of spring cleaning. From my youth, I recall that at least twice a year, my mom seemed to feel that our home had been immersed in mud. Drapes had to be laundered, walls were washed, floors scrubbed, scatter rugs taken out to be hung upon the clothesline after which they were hosed down. Though this ritual was also done in the fall, there was something more intentional about spring cleaning.

Not to be outdone by inside work, the yard also needed tending as the lawn awoke from its long winter slumber. That meant rakes and hand sores. All this effort, inside and out, embodied a ritual cleansing; a schlepping off of the mustiness of winter to welcome the birth of new life: spring.

I doubt Jesus was doing a spring cleaning at the Temple that day he got whipped up into a fervor. It's not often we hear of him losing his temper, but here he is lashing out at what he sees as defilement of sacred space. His argument is simple: the religious authorities had turned a place of worship into a place of commerce. Basically, an idol had entered where no idol had gone before.

What an affront to the most basic of commandments: *I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an idol...in the form of anything.* But they did make idols, as do we. In our current world, we have become so blasé to the charging bull of Wall Street that we no longer see the impact of greed upon the fabric of our society. If ever something needed to be put on a clothesline where it is hosed down and cleansed, it's that sacred bull at the intersection of Broadway and Morris St. and all said idol represents.

Jesus, however, does understand the need for such a cleansing. At first glance, it may seem he is talking about the Temple (and make no mistake about it he is for he is fulfilling what is written in the prophetic words of Zechariah: "*there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord.*" 14.21). But he is also talking about much, much more, something even more important than a physical structure. Jesus is talking about the soul.

The whole reference of this gospel reading points to an understanding that the temple of Jesus' body is now where the Spirit and Truth of God are found and abide. Until this point, the Israelites had looked to the Temple as the source of God's revelation, the place where God abides among the people. Jesus is speaking a truth that upturns that notion like he does the money changer's table to say the Spirit of the Living God is not found in the material world of commerce or physical structures of human making. It is found in the heart and soul of God's creation of which you and I are a part of. No longer do the people need to follow formularies advocating ritual purity through sacrifice. All it requires is faith. Faith that Jesus' message of radical hospitality and acceptance is the fulfillment of God's promise and steadfast love. But faith requires trust, and that can be a challenge.

Over and over again, we hear of people asking Jesus for signs. And even when they get those signs, they want more. They want continued proof that Jesus can satisfy their cravings. Not their needs; their cravings. It's not enough that he heals the sick, raises the dead, feeds the hungry. In effect, like most of us, they are covetous. They covet security and surety to sustain their faith thus requiring more and more signs.

Others seek not signs, but knowledge or wisdom. They need intellectual understanding to support their faith. They trust in empirical proofs where rational explanations guide their faith. Signs not required, knowledge will suffice, and this they covet more than anything.

Security and knowledge, signs and wisdom are not bad things in and of themselves. But when they clutter our lives with idols of various kinds, they make us dependent on our own abilities rather than trust in God as the source of full satisfaction. Idols obscure and distort our trust in Jesus to be our guide in caring for one another as God cares for us; of our trusting that Jesus will guide us in cleansing the temple of our soul to make room for God's love and mercy.

If only it was as easy as washing a wall or scrubbing the floor. It's not. Cleansing the soul requires intentional effort and abiding faith. What are those idols that clutter our lives and obstruct our relationship with God and our neighbor? Might it be pride? Maybe our ego or possibly envy? What do we covet? Where do we try and find satisfaction? Cleansing the soul will require reflection

and will be unique to each of us according to our vices. Regardless of what those are, the one cleaning solution available to each of us is Grace.

Grace isn't something that we talk about much in the Episcopal Church, at least that has been my experience. Yet, Grace is our universal solvent that cleanses away our sins and failings. It's grace that allows us to feel satisfied and secure in the faith and knowledge of the love of God. It's our willfulness that inhibits grace from entering our lives. It's those pesky idols we cling to that rebuff grace's ability to wash away our sins. However, the solution is simple.

Regardless of our idols' efforts to stain our lives, God's grace is available for the asking. All it takes is faith. Faith that though I am unworthy, God's abundant love washes away the deepest, darkest stains that lie upon my soul. And each of you are witness to this every Sunday when, just before the Eucharist, I ask God's grace to wash away my iniquities and cleans me from my sins. All we have to do is ask; open our hearts, repent from our idolatry, and turn to God. Grace is ours for the asking. Rather than cling to our idols, we have only to follow Jesus. Leave the world of dissatisfaction and disillusionment behind – follow me and be satisfied. Abandon the false gods of greed and covetousness, of surety and security, of pride and envy and turn to me and follow.

Spring may not yet be upon us, yet we have faith and trust that it will arrive. We travel with Jesus on our Lenten journey, trusting in faith that Easter will arrive. May this time of Lenten sojourning be one of cleansing our hearts and minds to be open to abundant grace that will wash away our sins and renew our hearts.