

# Cleansing the Temple

By: Penny Holste

March 4, 2018. The sermon today is on the story in John 2 of Jesus cleansing the temple. Did that system of animal butchering and sacrifice make people feel as though they were in the presence of God? And what about the people walled off from each other: women, Gentiles, tax collectors? Does our temple need to be cleansed? Pastor Penny offers some thoughts on how we can be welcoming to everyone.

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reuben had waited for this day for 12 years. He was finally old enough to accompany his father to sell their cows at the Passover festival in Jerusalem. There were four of them — perfect, unblemished cows — just the way the priest required them to be. And Reuben and his dad would carefully herd these cows the ten miles into Jerusalem. And when they got there, people would buy them to offer as sacrifices to the Lord, and they would pay well. Before this time, every time Reuben's father came back from Passover he would say well, now we have money for the next year. And he would feel happy, and he would bring a treat back for Reuben. Well Reuben's excitement built as they got closer to Jerusalem, because more and more people were joining them. But he couldn't believe it when he entered the city gates. He had never seen so many people in his life as there were in that city! And then they went into the temple, and as they came into the outer courtyard of the temple, Reuben read the sign: "Court of the Gentiles." When they walked in, he looked around to see if there were people that didn't look like him. He said father, where are the Gentiles? And his father said there's no room for them today. And when he looked around he could see why: it was full of people like his father and him, selling their cows and having them judged and inspected to make sure that the priest felt that they had no blemish. And then there were people changing money from the unclean coins to the half shekel of Tyre, which was what the priest required you to use. And then there were people who were buying the cows and the sheep and the doves as an offering to the Lord.

Well Reuben was so exhilarated by the smells and the sounds and the sights, that as soon as they got their cattle settled and his father gave him permission, he went out to explore the temple. As he left the outer court he read the sign: "No Gentile should walk beyond this side, under penalty of death." Of course he wasn't a Gentile, so he continued walking. And he began to see other signs around the building. "This is the court of the women." "This is the court of the lepers," who would be people who were cleansed of leprosy. "This is the court of the Israelites." And then he was drawn into an enormous room where a couple dozen families were all jammed in, each with an animal. And they were involved in the continuous progression of butchering these animals, as the priest would come and take the blood in a huge basin and pour it on the altar. And then once the animals were butchered they would be skinned, parts would be separated out and given to the priest for a burnt offering, and the rest of the animal was sent home with the family to roast and eat. And then their sacrifice was done. And as soon as they stepped out, two dozen more families would come in and take their places. And it was a continual procession of slaughtering and sacrificing all day long.

Well, it was time for Reuben to go back and find his father. But on his way there was a great commotion. Animals were running. People were running after animals. And there was a man, an angry man with a whip, who was shouting at people. Well, Reuben got back just in time to catch one of their

cows, but not before it had crushed its foot. And when he came back to his father, his father was cursing. His father was glaring at that man with the whip. His father said this animal can't be sold. It's maimed. We've just lost our income. And Reuben knew that this year there would be no treat for him after the Passover.

Well, what do you think it was that made Jesus so angry, to take up a whip and shout and make such a commotion? What was it that made him angry enough to cause harm to innocent people like Reuben and his family? Because it surely must have happened. It wasn't that he was complaining that the merchants were being dishonest. In some of the other gospels that is the accusation Jesus makes, but not here. Here, he is disparaging the entire temple system, the entire sacrificial system. And when you think about it, if people were involved in that system of inspection of animals, changing the money, and the assembly line slaughter of animals which was part of the ritual, would they come away feeling that they had been in the presence of God, that they had been able to bring their offering as a thank offering to God for God's saving work, which was the purpose of the Passover? And then most likely they wouldn't because it was so different from what God had wanted. God had always chosen to be close to people. God spoke to Moses in the burning bush. God accompanied the children of Israel for 40 years in the wilderness. Where was that God in all of this? Where was the God that wanted to be close to the people? That God was hidden by layer after layer of ritual and commerce in the temple. And worse than that, this temple process, this ritual, this religious system designated some people as less worthy of having a relationship with God — women, Gentiles, cured lepers, tax collectors — and they were walled off from God. Where other people, a select few — the priests who came from generally five important families — they were allowed in the inner sanctums. They were therefore allowed access to God.

I suppose when you're in the middle of a system, you really can't critique it. You can't see the problems. And I wonder if that's why this story has been saved for us these two thousand years. I wonder if God is wanting us to do some soul-searching and ask: are we, without realizing it, building walls up, designating some people as less able and less deserving of a relationship with God? Something that comes to my mind is I wonder what it signals to the community that we have a fence in our yard. And I'm sure there were problems that required the building of that fence in the past. But this is a new time, so in my musings I wonder what would happen if we made a gate, a second gate on the Lockwood side, and then made a sidewalk between the gates and put a few benches. What would that say to the community? Would it say that the people who worship in this beautiful stone house also want the community to be part of us? I don't know. Or should we, as some have suggested, offer an additional, different kind of worship service for people for whom the words "hymn of praise" and "Apostles' Creed" and even "gospel" have no meaning? I think the only way we're going to know the walls that we do build without realizing it, is to talk to people who are outside of the system, people who have no religious loyalty — maybe a coworker, maybe a child or a grandchild who does not attend church, and ask them: what does church mean to you? What is it that that whole structure says to you? And maybe we will get some answers that will help us.

Because Jesus came, as he said, to draw all people to himself. He intermingled. He loved, he ate, he laughed with the very people that were walled out and cut off by the religious system of his day: the women, the Gentiles, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. And for our part, Jesus' life and death means that no sin that we have ever committed, no mistake we have ever made, will ever cut us off or wall us out of God's love — that because of Christ, God's arms are always open to us. May we find a way to share that picture of God and that picture of the church with the world.

Amen.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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