

Cleaning Out  
John 2:13-22  
March 7, 2021  
First Presbyterian, Luling

Some of you know what I've been up to this week in my spare time. I've been splitting wood and re-doing our woodpile. "Woodpile" is making it sound nicer than it was, though. It was a wood heap, maybe. A corner of the yard where we chunked fallen branches, and where the guys who cut down a tree a year ago tossed the pieces they saved at my request, for firewood. It hadn't gotten any tidier over the past year. We've burned some. I brought a bunch up to the porch to prepare for the snowstorm, and most of it remained there since we didn't have too much trouble with our electricity. Just after the storm, we had another tree cut down, and again I asked that the tree people save me some pieces for firewood. They cut the trunk into firewood length chunks, but the pieces are huge. Too heavy for me to move. It was clear they needed splitting.

We don't own a chainsaw. Until Monday, nor did we own a splitting wedge or a sledgehammer. Now we have a six pound sledgehammer and my new favorite thing, the splitting wedge. In the way that these projects go, the idea to split this new wood led me to realize that some of the wood we had in the heap already needed splitting too. And then I further realized that the wood heap was just an open invitation to neighborhood copperheads and rattlesnakes. It really needed to be tidied up, at a minimum. But what it really needed was a firewood rack, to get it off the ground. But before I could put a rack there, I had to clear the whole heap out. So as of this moment, I'm mid project. I've cleared the wood heap out. I've split a little bit of wood, but I'm pretty slow and wear myself out quickly. I've constructed the world's ugliest, but maybe cheapest, firewood rack, with fence posts torn out last summer and cinder blocks. And I've stacked the wood that was already cut and the wood that I've split so far. Maybe I'll finish it up this week, maybe not. It's surprisingly fun and good therapy.

The point here is that I couldn't make a new, tidy, safer woodpile, until I had cleaned out the mess of the old one. And cleaning out the mess of the old one wasn't dangerous, but it certainly could have been, had the imagined snakes materialized. As it is, I have lots of scrapes on my arms and sore joints in my hands.

This passage from the Gospel of John is often called the Cleansing of the Temple. It also appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, though in those three, it's toward the end, leading directly to Jesus's arrest. Here in John, it's one of the first things Jesus does, right after the first sign of his public ministry, where he turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana. This is the next event, and it's hardly the celebration mood of a wedding. Quite the opposite.

It's clear that Jesus is angry, really angry. In the other gospels, he condemns the Temple leaders for making his Father's house into a "den of robbers," but here in John all he says is that they are making it into a "marketplace." There is speculation that the money changers and animal sellers were taking advantage of the poor, as they made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and needed to obtain appropriate sacrifices.

That speculation may be accurate, but it's not there in what Jesus says. In the larger picture, this is just how the Temple was set up, the institution that had developed over the centuries to accommodate the religious requirements of observance of the festivals. The

Temple leaders and probably most folks who participated in the observances were not aware that the money changers and the animal sellers were potentially corrupting true religious observance. It was just the institution they had all become accustomed to.

It was unremarkable and unnoticed, that is, until Jesus sees it and notices it and decides these are an institution that is not consistent with true worship. He clears out the animals and their sellers with a whip, turns over the tables of the money changers. He cleans out what he considers the mess that is there, the heap of things that have cluttered the Temple courts and prevented true worship.

It's not until things are cleaned out that true worship can begin to rebuild. And then Jesus gets confusing, at least to his original audience. We have knowledge that they don't—the knowledge of the resurrection. Jesus claims he will raise the temple back up in three days after it is destroyed. John the narrator reminds us that Jesus is speaking about the temple of his body.

The Temple, as it had developed and gotten complicated and corrupted away from worship in spirit and in truth, needed to be cleaned out before something new could be built.

I feel like this is the millionth time I've said something like this in the past year, but it seems to be where this scripture is leading me, so we must need to hear it again. What is it that we have built up, that we have made complicated and complex, maybe even that we have corrupted, in our institution of the church, so that the church as we have known it makes true worship impossible? What is it time to clean out? And if nothing else, this pandemic time may have just shown us some of those things.

It may not be easy to answer that question: what is true worship, what is helping us worship in truth, and what is a distraction or stumbling block or blockade? And what about our neighbors? What about our institution is a distraction or blockade or even repellant? I think this is the opportune time to think about those things and clean out what we need to.