

THE CLEANSING OF THIS TEMPLE

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
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He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (John 2:16)

Here in this little corner of God's kingdom, otherwise known as Grace Church, a certain truism applies to this building: one thing always leads to another. Lately you may recall reading about steel tie-rods in the tower. The tie-rods came in the 1880s, when the original wooden spire gave way to one made of stone. Our predecessors in this place were concerned about the tower's ability to bear up under the additional weight. Would the walls buckle? The architect of the church, James Renwick, Jr., who was still alive and serving on the vestry, insisted that they would not. Nevertheless, the tie-rods were added to provide increased stabilization, and there they have remained ever since, quietly doing the work of inverted buttresses. Two of them are visible beneath the plaster ceiling in the west gallery, and three more are out of sight in the tower above.

Last fall we noticed that one of the tie-rods was dangling precariously across the west rose window. We called in the engineers, who strongly recommended not only that we replace the failed tie-rod, but have the others examined as well. \$15,000 later, we now have two, new stainless steel tie-rods in the west gallery that you can gaze upon today as you return to your pew after receiving Communion, confident that your pledge dollar is at work. But wait: what about the other three that are out of sight higher up in the tower? The engineers recommended that they be inspected as well, but they wouldn't go near them. Why not? Two words: pigeon poop! For 130 years, toxic, corrosive, disease ridden, fungus filled pigeon poop had accumulated in the tower. Lord, have mercy upon us! One thing leads to another, so the saying goes. Before we could inspect the upper tie-rods we had to clean out the pigeon poop. One firm gave us a quote \$100,000 to do the job! Another came in at a bargain: only \$10,000, and they would install wire screens to prevent pigeons from entering in the future. We hired the latter firm, and they've been hard at it all week removing the offending matter.

So that's the latest news from this little corner of God's kingdom. My take away: the best time to rid yourself of pigeons was 130 years ago; the second best time is today. Or, one could even argue that we are obeying the words of Jesus, who at the Jerusalem temple, *told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here!"*

Now for the cleansing of the temple, one of today's readings that we heard in the Gospel of John (2:13-22). In the days of Jesus the Jerusalem temple was the heart and soul of the Jews. It was the icon of their identity. It was like what the Tiffany Diamond is to Tiffany & Co. Some time ago Stacie, the boys, and I were in midtown and we stopped into Tiffany's flagship store on 5th Avenue. There on the first floor, behind an impregnable display case, is the 128.54 carat Tiffany Diamond. We were bold enough to ask the guard standing near the case how much the gem was worth. He replied (surprisingly, as if he'd been asked the question before) that it was priceless. It's never been for sale. The only way to own it, he said, would be to buy controlling interest in the company. The Tiffany Diamond is the jewel of Tiffany's identity. The Temple was the jewel of Hebrew identity. The Jews believed that as long as they had the temple, they had God. The temple conveyed the presence of God. Also, the temple was where God forgave the sins of the people through a complex system of animal sacrifices. The presence of God and the forgiveness of sins: these two things were the mission of the temple.

Jesus apparently believed the temple had gone off its mission. You see, the people had it backwards. It wasn't that by having the temple the people had God. Rather, it was God who had the people. What is more, God had a mission for the people of Israel. The mission was for them to be a light to enlighten the nations. Yes, out of all the nations of the earth, God chose the Jews to be his own people. But the purpose of the blessing was for them to bless the rest of the world. The Jews and the temple were to be a doorway through which the Gentiles would encounter the one, true God of all creation. Sadly, the temple was conveying just the opposite. It was becoming a symbol of heightened Jewish identity and nationalism. It was becoming a lightning rod of revolutionaries who wanted to rebel against Rome. Roman pagans and foreign Gentiles ideally would have no business being there at all. Even Jews themselves who wanted to make a sacrifice had to exchange their money for temple currency. Why? Because foreign coins with pagan images were unclean. Really? The heavens declare the glory of God, but the Creator of all things visible and invisible wasn't big enough to accept Roman money? It seems rather petty.

It was at the tables of the moneychangers where Jesus chose to take dramatic action. It's a scene we've come to call the cleansing of the temple, and it raises more questions than it answers. Concerning the Who, What, When, Where, and Why of the incident, we can speak confidently only of Who and Where. The "who" is Jesus, and the "where" is the temple. As for when he took action, the four Gospels give three different dates. John's account, which we heard today, is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it three years later in Holy Week. Matthew and Luke suggest it happened on Palm Sunday, but Mark says no, it was Monday. Exactly what Jesus did is also an open question. Could one person really clear out every cow, sheep, and pigeon, as well as drive away the moneychangers and tip over their tables? Or was it more of a symbolic act – enough to be noticed, but not enough to be arrested on the spot? We just don't know.

The "why" of it all is a puzzle as well. Were his actions the result of a sudden burst of anger, or was Jesus carrying out a carefully conceived plan? If the latter, did he want to see the temple cleaned up and reformed, or was he foretelling its destruction? Most Biblical scholars have concluded that Jesus was coming to the temple with a note of God's judgment. Jesus was foreseeing a time in the near future when the temple would be no more. God was displeased. The temple had strayed from its mission of being a house of prayer for all people. Its theological integrity was compromised, and because one thing always leads to another, the corrosive effect would be putting in peril even the temple's structural integrity.

As a professional cleric, it's easy for me to rise in defense of the temple and say, "Wait just a minute! Not so fast with all the judgment." My guess is that the rank and file of beleaguered temple employees were doing their best. The people needed a place to serve as the focus of God's presence. They needed a ritual to convey God's forgiveness of their sins. All this is what the temple workers were providing. Animal sacrifice was a messy enough business from start to finish without having some angry guy with a messiah complex storming in, clearing the decks, and making it worse. Who's going to pay for the cleanup?

A while back a neighbor who lives east of the church sent me an email to say that the best part of his apartment was his view of the Grace Church spire. But it seems the lights that enlighten the eastern, or backside of the spire have been out and can we please get them fixed. I thanked him for the information, and promised we'd look into it. If the truth be known, it was about the time that our facilities manager died, and an outdoor lightbulb just wasn't a priority. A few months later the man sent me another email to complain that the work hadn't been done. When I politely suggested that he make a financial gift to the church to help pay for new spire lighting, guess what? His communications went as dark as the burned out bulb. No more emails!

Don't get me wrong: I want to make sure the spire is brightly lit. Atop the spire is the cross. In today's reading from 1st Corinthians, we heard St. Paul: *The message about the cross is*

foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. I believe that Scripture can help us interpret Scripture. In other words, today's reading from 1st Corinthians (1:18-25), with its emphasis on the cross, can help shed light on a topic that still for us remains partially in the dark. What might have been the motivations of Jesus at the cleansing of the temple in the Gospel of John? And why are we talking about it two-thousand years later?

Consider: Jesus said to the Jewish authorities who confronted him, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They were perplexed; the temple had been under construction for forty-six years. How was one man going to build another in three days? What they didn't understand, John tells us, is that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. Jesus himself, who saw the cross looming before him, was assuming the role of the temple. Jesus did, indeed, have a messiah complex for one very good reason: he was the Messiah. Thus, when Jesus came to the temple and performed his dramatic action, he brought more than a note of God's judgment. He came as the anointed one of God to complete the work of redemption. The cross would not replace the temple. Rather, the cross would complete the work of forgiveness the temple was meant to do. On the cross, Jesus would make there, *by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.* The cross would be the crowning jewel of God's forgiveness, something that the temple had imperfectly been conveying all along.

Likewise, Jesus would not replace Israel. Rather, he would be Israel and complete the mission God gave to his chosen people. Jesus stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross so that everyone – Jews and Gentiles alike – might come within the reach of God's saving embrace. No longer would salvation be construed as the private possession of one nation alone that others might merely look upon and admire. The message of the cross is that God's presence is available to everyone through Jesus. Jesus does not replace, or abolish, or destroy the great story that God was trying to tell the world through Israel. He completes the story. His name shall be called Emmanuel – God with us. God himself is with us today by the power of the Spirit of Christ. God himself is with us, given to us through the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the Sacrament of his body and blood.

The mission of the church – our mission – is to lift high the cross, and if possible, even light it to enlighten the neighborhood. It is to proclaim Christ crucified, even to a world that may take it as foolishness. I remember the summer of 2004 when I first became Rector of Grace Church. In those days the spire was encased in scaffolding as the top third of it was undergoing a complete rebuild. The scaffolding included a stairway that would take you all the way to the cross atop the spire, 23 stories above the Broadway sidewalk. I figured that since I was the rector I had authority to climb the stairs. So with a hard hat on my head and a camera in hand, up to the top I went. When I reached the cross the stone carvers suggested I pose for a picture next to it. I was surprised by how large it was, and is. It is far taller than I am. In fact, my head only came up to the arms of the cross. I marveled at its size and the height to which we had raised it.

I was young and naïve then, and had no idea how much engineering and sacrificing it took to hold the cross in its lofty place. I had never even heard of a tie-rod, and certainly had no idea that such things were hard at work, invisibly so, supporting the cross. I had no idea that even as I stood there the pigeons were doing their corrosive worst, and that the temple would need to be cleansed in more ways than I could imagine. I am older and wiser now, but no less eager for the cleansing of this temple, both in spirit and in substance, so that these stones might participate in God's work of redemption. My prayer is that you and I might be built up as living stones in this house of the Lord: cleansed of our sins through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and filled with his presence through the power of the Spirit. Then we can count ourselves among those being saved, even a light to enlighten the nations.