

Spring Cleaning

Third Sunday in Lent – Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13-22

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson March 11, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

About this time every year when I was a kid, “The Mom” would descend upon the room I shared with one or more of my brothers, in the familiar, fabled ritual of Spring Cleaning.

Usually, when required to clean our room, *or else*, my brothers and I used the time-honored kid technique for meeting that particular requirement: We would take up all the clothes that were littering the room, whether they were caked with mud and grime or had just failed to fit the bill when dragged from dresser drawers on hurried school mornings, and toss them into the dirty-clothes-hamper. We stuffed the larger toys into whatever nooks and crannies were available on our shelves, and the smaller toys, wads of paper and various other detritus, were shoved into the ever-expanding, dark recesses of our closet or into the even darker abyss under the beds.

But every year during Spring Cleaning, wielding a broom and a trash bag and with the knowledge and will to use them, Mom would cut a path from the door to the closet by way of the dark, dusty place under the bed. With us helping as directed, but mostly trying to stay out of the way of the swinging broom, she filled every drawer and emptied every corner, restoring everything to its proper order – for at least as long as it took for it to be *our* turn again.

As I began to look at this morning’s Lectionary texts, I could see no way around it – the Ten Commandments and Jesus cleansing the Temple both point to some hard truths about the brokenness of our relationship with our Creator and with one another. Here in the heart of the Lenten season, here in the middle of our Lenten journey, perhaps it’s a good time to get out the broom and the trash bag and do some Spring Cleaning, to take the opportunity to clean out the closets of our lives and the dark, dusty, dirty places under our hearts. Now, I know that some of you, like me, grew up hearing nothing *but* sermons about the sinfulness of the human race, the corruption of human existence. the utter depravity of all things human, Some of you fled such an absolute, wallowing emphasis on our unqualified uncleanness. For those of you who feel that one more sermon about sin would send you over the edge into despair, I invite you to turn your listeners down for the next few minutes, because this morning we’re *going* to talk about Sin.

First, taken in themselves, the Ten Commandments are an excellent starting place for looking at sin in our personal lives. Although I think it is a perversion to make the issue of their posting on courtroom walls the stuff of political careers, these ancient laws capture pretty well what most people consider right moral behavior for every human being.

But in our modern, individualistic world, all too often, we get to thinking of sin as just a private, personal thing. In point of fact, though, the problem of sin is a very great deal more complicated than mere adherence to social conventions and prohibitions. The problem of sin is not only, or even *primarily*, concerned with individual acts of disobedience, but with the consequence of those acts on the community around us and on the whole of creation. The Ten Commandments are not just about each of us keeping our individual selves clean and pure before God. God’s commandments are about maintaining our relationships – with God and with our fellow human beings. They are about giving God his proper place in our lives. And they are about seeing that God is equally at work in the lives of others.

Each of us is part of the whole of God’s creation. And that means that each of us is part of everyone else. Each time we transgress one of God’s laws for our lives, we produce a ripple through all of creation. Each time we sin, each time we blatantly do what we know we ought not, each time we turn

aside from doing what we know we ought, we add to the total weight of Sin that oppresses humankind and separates us *all* from God's love.

Whether we succumb to them or not, we are all familiar with the individual temptations that pop up seemingly out of the blue: The lie that would put us ahead of our competitor. The covetousness that verges *just* on the brink of helping ourselves to what belongs to someone else. The anger that burns hot enough to wish the other dead.

But the bigger problem is that Sin is not always so obvious. No one drove a whole herd of cattle into the Temple one day and set up shop. No one established a consortium to situate money lending facilities within the Temple precincts. No one drew up a master plan for the exploitation of Temple property and the worshipers who came there. Each of these perversions of the law happened as a slow, piece-by-piece deterioration of the integrity of the worship of God.

And so it is with sin in our own lives. When that big temptation jumps up in our path, it is because we have, over time, allowed little things to pile up so deep that the big ones have something to stand on. "What's the harm with bringing an extra sheep into the Temple when we go? Maybe if we can sell it to someone else, we can pay for the trip." "Maybe next year we can bring two or three." "What's the harm in bringing my money poke to the Temple when I go to pray. Maybe someone from out of town won't have the right coins to offer and I can help them out." "Maybe next week I'll bring my little table and a chair so I'll be more comfortable." "What's the harm in putting this little personal extravagance on my company expense account." "Maybe tomorrow I can just transfer a little to my other account to cover that sort of thing." Slowly but surely, we set up pile upon pile upon pile of inconsequential envies, of petty thefts, of little white lies, of back-biting comments that are really okay because, after all, it's true, "bless her heart." Slowly but surely, we set up pile upon pile, until we have given Sin a permanent dwelling in our hearts. And then we act surprised with ourselves when we "fall prey" to more extravagant temptations.

Far too often, we tend to see sin as some sort of indiscretion, some sort of impropriety, some sort of *faux pas*. Oh, not someone *else's* sin – that we're pretty good at seeing for the monstrous decay that it is. Our own sin, on the other hand – that's just a little variance from the norm. But Sin – and make no mistake, I'm talking about *your* sin and *mine* – Sin is anything *but* a trivial pursuit

Sin robs us of our identity as children of the Almighty Father. Sin turns us inward and pulls us away from the Father's love. Sin binds us as slaves and holds us in its controlling power. Sin is not an inconvenient flaw in God's plan, but a giant fault line that has torn through the entire fabric of creation. Sin is not just a momentary illness of our race, but a vicious, aggressive, malignant cancer eating away at the very core of our humanity.

As complicated as the problem of Sin is, though, dear friends, its solution is really quite simple and straight forward. When Jesus walked into the courts of the Temple that day, he didn't form a committee to study the problem. He didn't call for a vote. He didn't even tell a parable. Faced with the need to clean up the mess that the Temple had become, Jesus picked up a handful of rope, rolled up his sleeves, and went to work cleaning it out.

You see, we cannot invite Christ into our hearts without letting him come in swinging. We cannot expect him to be a part of our lives without being willing to radically change that life. We cannot let him clean Sin from our lives without being ready to open the dark closets and the darker, dustier, dirtier places under the bed. Whatever is not pure, regardless how minuscule or how precious to us, must go. Whatever we have set up as central to our lives, whatever we have put on the thrones of our hearts, if it is not Christ, must be unseated. Whatever separates us from God's love, must be thrown out.

Okay now, those of you who may have tuned out earlier, should come on back and join us. Because the gospel, the absolute good news is that our Savior does not demand a cleansed temple for no reason. He does not drive the pride and the greed and the avarice from our hearts to leave it empty. No, once he has helped us to remove all those things that clutter and crowd our hearts, Christ himself becomes the Lord of our lives. Christ himself fills the space made for love of him from the beginning of God's plan.

We who are saved from Sin, we who are set free from the power of Death, we who are washed in the blood of Christ and made whiter than snow in the sight of the Father, still struggle day by day in a world that is still tied up in the clutches of Sin. But in that struggle, we have an ally; we have *the* ally, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. And that makes all the difference in the world. Thanks be to God!