

Order of Worship

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2021

WELCOME

Hello God, thank you for this day.

It's 9:03 and we need your help.

Guide us by your Holy Spirit to reach new people,

Connect us all through Christ's love, and

Empower us to love and serve others. Amen.

PRELUDE *Prelude in G Minor* J.S. Bach

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 19:7-14 UMH 751

HYMN *Praise the Lord! Ye Heavens Adore Him* HYFRYDOL

SCRIPTURE I Corinthians 1:18-25

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

HYMN 504 *The Old Rugged Cross* THE OLD RUGGED CROSS

SCRIPTURE John 2:13-22

MESSAGE Rev. Rebecca Voss

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 365 *Grace Greater than Our Sin* MOODY

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE *Voluntary in A Minor* J. Stanley

PRAYER CORNER

Please call the office at (715) 842-2201 or Pastor Rebecca's cell phone at (920)-360-7396 to let us know if you need pastoral care or would like to talk and pray to help lift whatever is a burden or joy in your life. If you would like to be part of an email prayer chain, please contact the office so we can revive and strengthen our prayer ministry at First UMC.

Thirsting for God CLEANSING Pastor Rebecca Voss

What are the first pictures that come to your mind when you hear the word “cleansing”? I imagine fresh-smelling bubbles, a sparkling-clean shower or tub with strong water pressure, and a crystal-clear waterfall. But if you’ve had a colonoscopy, sorted through a loved-one’s home that became unsafe due to hoarding, or are struggling with a tangled mess of emotions in the midst of a tumultuous time, the word “cleansing” is also connected to frustration, pain, and tears.

It’s quite similar to our first thoughts about Jesus. We think of his loving, kind, gentle, and forgiving characteristics. But then we’re jolted by today’s lesson in John 2. The story is often called “The Cleansing of the Temple”, but it is not a gentle rain rinsing away the dust or even a pressure washer scouring out the mildew. Jesus makes a whip, scatters animals, throws money, turns over tables, and yells at the merchants. It sounds less like a “Cleansing of the Temple” and more like a “Temple Tantrum”.

If I were on the scene, I wonder if my training in de-escalation techniques would come in handy. Would it help to calmly model a non-anxious presence? Would I tell him that his actions will confuse people and frustrate their faith for millenia to come? Those techniques may be relevant for everyone from toddlers to terrorists, but it’s probably better to simply quiet our own frightened reactions and listen to the message that Jesus is saying with actions and words.

“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (v. 16). To be honest, the first part reminds me of my cleaning technique. From a young age I was very eager to “take these things out of here” by gathering up anything resembling clutter, putting it in boxes, and dumping it all on whoever’s bed I suspected it belonged to. But I doubt Jesus was struggling with issues of control like I have. Jesus was grieved to see what is supposed to be a House of Prayer turned into a Plaza of Profits.

As Jesus’ disciples stood back and watched all of this unfold, Psalm 69:9 resounded in their hearts: *“For zeal for your house consumes me”*. At first glance Jesus seems to be coming unhinged. But as we tune in to listen more clearly, we hear Jesus say, “I am passionate about fulfilling – and helping you fulfill - God’s purpose. Don’t settle for a form of faith that denies God’s power. Be willing to let me clear away anything that gets between me and you.”

Those who benefited from the trading at the Temple became defensive and guarded: *“What sign can you show us for doing this?”* (v. 18). It’s no coincidence that these Jewish leaders, many of whom fought to preserve the status quo (much like we Christians do today), asked for a sign. Our first reading from 1 Corinthians 1:22 says, *“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom.”* As long as miracles benefited and did not threaten them, people in the Jewish culture valued them as a sign that God was speaking through a prophet. Likewise, people in Greek (and Roman) cultures valued learning and wisdom as the mark of someone worth listening to.

“But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...” v. 23. Jesus comes along and cleanses away all the assumptions. God tosses out many of the things this world says are valuable. Jesus overturns the value systems of our cultures and drives away our methods of self-preservation and self-promotion. His own life was the ultimate example of that. Jesus could have miraculously saved himself, but that wouldn’t accomplish the need to save humanity. Jesus could have used infinite wisdom to enlighten the world, but more knowledge doesn’t lead to more love. Even though the miraculous signs and wise teachings of Christ exceed any other person in history, those alone could never save us. Instead, Jesus explains that his death and resurrection will be the source of our hope: *‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for 46 years, and you will raise it up in three days?’* (John 2:19-20).

Last week I was grocery shopping with my kids, and they said we needed to get mozzarella sticks. I started pushing the cart toward the dairy section, and they kept insisting to go back to the frozen food aisle. I finally got to the cheese section to prove to them that the mozzarella sticks were right there, and they could pick out how many they would use. They protested, *“Those aren’t mozzarella sticks! That is string cheese! We need the mozzarella sticks - the kind we bake in the toaster oven!”* Just as my kids and I were using the same word but thinking different things, Jesus is referring to himself as the Temple, and the Jewish leaders are referring to a building as the Temple. *“But he was speaking of the temple of his body.”* (v. 21) The Temple building was a temporary shadow form of God’s presence, but Jesus is the exact and eternal presence of God with us, Immanuel.

All of that is far beyond human comprehension. It seems like foolishness that God intends to gather and be present with us not necessarily in a building but gathered to Jesus as the Body of Christ. It seems like insanity that God would offer his life of love and grace to people who would torture and kill him out of fear and greed. After all, death by crucifixion was reserved for the lowliest of slaves and servants who supposedly committed the most egregious of crimes.

Much like how Jesus “cleansed” the Temple by tearing it apart, in 1 Corinthians 1:19 the apostle Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14: *“I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.”* God will cleanse away the pride that comes from our human-powered wisdom and discernment. The Holy Spirit will wash away our self-sufficient pride. As Eugene Peterson translates today’s Call to Worship from Psalm 19:11-13, *“God’s Word warns us of danger and directs us to hidden treasure. Otherwise how will we find our way? Or know when we play the fool? Clean the slate, God, so we can start the day fresh! Keep me from stupid sins, from thinking I can take over your work. Then I can start this day sun-washed, scrubbed clean of the grime of sin.”*

We may unknowingly play the fool ourselves. Perhaps this past year has been cleansing us from the foolish idea that our church was based in a building rather than lived as Christ’s body. Maybe we’re being cleansed from assuming influential jobs are better, and become more grateful for essential workers who labor long, hard, and risky hours to keep us healthy, fed, clean, and safe. Unlike the signs for Jews and wisdom for Greeks, may this year of cleansing help us see signs of grace and wisdom in the so-called foolishness of God.

As 1 John 1:7 reminds us, *“if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”* It’s counter-intuitive, but that’s how being a fool for Christ works. Blood that normally stains now washes away our sins. A cross that symbolized the death penalty for slaves becomes a sign of eternal life. A holy place of worship is re-centered on the Holy One we worship.

Please pray with me: *Lord, we ask for your cleansing that forgives, saves, and makes us new. We release everything that gets between us and Christ, and me and others. Gather us to Jesus, our Temple, and help us to die to self and find new life in Christ. Amen.*