



March 15, 2009

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

John 2:13-22

“Clearing Out the Junk”

(Lift up a glass half-filled with water. Ask, “How many say this glass is half-full? How many say it is half-empty?—Ok, now, which way of looking at this is good: half full? Half-empty?)

This is the classic test for pessimism and optimism. And, we usually think the optimistic view is the “right” perspective. *Emptiness* is seen as a symbol of something bad: loneliness, lostness, disconnection from life, from others.

There are all kinds of signs that we are uncomfortable with “emptiness”:

- Television and radio buzz in our homes
- Music and talk shows fill our cars and trucks
- TV’s accompany us out camping
- We jog with ear buds, exercise in the gym plugged into music videos and television programs
- We hike in the wilderness (to get “away from it all”) with ear buds- I’ve even seen skiers and snowboarders with them, racing down the slopes
- We don’t go to a museum, movie, special program at church- unless we have someone to “go with” us
- We don’t sit still too often or too long, we’re always buzzing—if not outwardly, inwardly, with thoughts and worries that fly through our minds like moths dancing around a flame
- We fill our emptiness with food, drink, drugs
- We shop! Maybe less than in the past, given the economy- but if we feel we can’t shop right now, we DREAM of what we may buy LATER; SOMEDAY!

There are signs that ancient people were also afraid and uncomfortable with EMPTINESS. They feared being alone and impoverished in a wild and unpredictable world. So, they surrounded themselves with a host of gods. These were safely located and available in shrines and temples. They were given both faces and voices. Many decorations, designs, statues and drawings depicted what various gods looked like. Oracles SPOKE for the gods when they were paid to do so.

The Hebrew call to practice monotheism was RADICAL to people of that time. It was FRIGHTENING. It asked them to strip themselves of practices and beliefs that protected them. The Hebrew call to practice monotheism was at the heart of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus' actions described in our Scripture today took place in that same Temple.

The Hebrew faith was expressed through Temple worship, which was rich in ritual, but SO DIFFERENT than the polytheistic practices of nearby nations and groups. In the heart of Old Jerusalem was the Temple. In the heart of the Temple was the Holy of Holies, where only the priest could enter. In the heart of the Holy of Holies, behind partitions and curtains, sat the Ark of the Covenant. In the heart of the Ark was the throne, or Mercy Seat.

The Mercy Seat was a flat slab of gold resting on top of the Ark. Guarding each end of the slab, and of one piece with it, were the golden cherubim, wings arching over the golden seat. There, on that slab, the high priest sprinkled sacrificial blood on the Day of Atonement. Over the seat, between the Cherubim, was the dwelling place of God. And that space was EMPTY. The most sacred space for the Hebrew people, the space where God was present in the midst of his people—that space was EMPTY.

Rev. Leonard Sweet makes an observation about this: “It is exactly because there was no gilded statue or talking idol that the Israelites were able to experience the living presence of God’s holiness in their midst.”

Jesus came to the Temple on that day long ago, and became furious. He reacted to the JUNK filling a place that needed to be EMPTY. Jesus knew there needed to be an empty space inviting God to enter and make himself known. There were a multitude of things that were stealing away the silence and space needed for us to perceive the holy and living God. There was surging activity, haggling voices, the noise of animals and their smell. There was GREED, as the money changers took the common currency and returned the required Temple coins at an insane exchange rate. They exploited their people who were longing to be made right with God through worship and sacrifice.

Jesus cried out in rage, turning over tables, driving people and animals out of the Temple.

As people committed to following Jesus, we need to pay attention to his feelings in this situation. Jesus loves us, yes, but sometimes he is angry with us, too. When we ignore his claim on our lives, and fill each day with things that have nothing to do with God or God's will, Jesus is not pleased. He wants US to recognize the clutter that prevents him from fully entering our lives. He wants US to see how vital that is—he wants US to throw some tables around if we need to! There is too much in our lives that CROWDS GOD OUT.

Where is there activity in your life that is CLUTTER?

Electronics exert a strong pull. There's nothing wrong with them in themselves—BUT HOW MUCH AND HOW OFTEN WE USE THEM is not a trivial matter. Television and computer games, video games, even the wonderful Wii—they all can eat up minutes and hours of time- and what feels like 20 minutes soon becomes two hours.

There are other good things that can eat up more time than God wants. I read long ago that things like house cleaning tend to expand to fill the time available. Some of us straighten and clean whenever we have a spare moment, and time for prayer, devotional reading, or just sitting with God disappears. I have spoken to hard working people who find that the only way they can keep up with their e-mail is to scan their Blackberries whenever they have even 3-5 minutes available. This becomes a burden and a tyranny that intrudes into their family life and relationships, INCLUDING their relationship with Christ.

Where is there NOISE in your life that robs you of silence in which to meet God?

Friends, Rev. Tom Walker is leading a study on the Lord's Prayer at the 10:30 Adult Sunday School class this Lenten season. That prayer asks us to MAKE A COMMITMENT to be a part of God's will being done "on earth as it is in heaven". Our daily choices matter. Are we living in ways that help God's will to be done, on earth, just as it is in heaven? It might seem as though Windexing the mirrors instead of spending a moment in prayer is a SMALL THING. But it isn't. God's kingdom comes, God's will is done as we are faithful step by step through each day.

And where is God heading? What can our small daily choices help bring about? Let's remember the vision of John, in Revelation:

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

²²I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

May God help us to clear out the junk, so we can be instruments of his love and life in this world. Amen!