

Welcome

Have you ever been into a hoarder's house? We lived next to one when we first moved to Texas, and I visited with him a few times. I only ever went into the living room, because that was about the only place you could go in the house. And even the living room was standing-room only. He had his chair, and it was surrounded by stacks of mail, magazines, and assorted junk. You couldn't see his kitchen, and there was a path between the stacks of junk that led to the back of the house.

Psychologically, we know that hoarding is caused by an irrational attachment to possessions. If you've ever seen the show *Hoarders*, you know how difficult it is for the hoarder to clear out their house. What is so obviously junk to everyone else is irreplaceable treasure to them. What is so obviously poisoning their life to everyone else (sometimes quite literally) is essential lifeblood to them.

One reason I'm fascinated by hoarding is that, if I'm being honest, I'm a bit of a clutterbug. I'm sentimental. I'll save a thank you note I've received for *years*. A little trinket someone gave me? I'll hold onto it long after I forgot who actually gave it to me. Fortunately, I realized this about myself relatively early in my life. During grad school, I moved year-to-year, as roommates came and went. I was packing up my apartment for one move when, in the back of my closet, I found two sealed boxes.

What could they be?

I cracked them open and low and behold, they were filled with beautiful, wonderful piles of junk! Glorious trinkets and keepsakes I had completely forgotten existed until I laid my eyes on them. I scooped them up and marveled at them. I found them! I can't live without them!

Except... apparently they had spent an entire year in a box in my closet. And I hadn't missed them. And right there, on the floor, something clicked in my head. I boxed all of it back up and took it right down to the dumpster.

To this day, I can't tell you one thing that was in either of those boxes. And hey, it was two fewer boxes I had to load and unload. Two fewer boxes to take up space in my closet. Two fewer boxes of junk to clutter my life.

Friends, not many of us in here are hoarders today. But we're going to talk about clutter. Because the reality is, even if you're not a packrat like me, we all fill our lives, our schedules, our spending, with clutter. With small things that take up not much space on their own. But when you step back and look at the broad sweep of our lives, our schedule, our finances, we don't have much room to move around. We're rushing from commitment to commitment, from paycheck to paycheck, with no wiggle-room.

And that's dangerous because all those good little things take up enough space that we don't have room for the work God calls us to. We can't do the things God calls us to do, fund the things God calls us to fund, be the people God calls us to be because we don't have any margin. We need God to make space in our lives, create some margin so we can be about the work to which God has called us.

Message

We're in the season of Lent, when the Church gets serious about preparing ourselves to the work God calls us to in the world. We prepare by fasting, praying and practicing generosity - these practices help us to identify sin in our lives so we can repent of it and turn to God for healing and restoration.

Our Lent series this year is called The Devil in the Details. We're reading stories of Jesus' journey toward the cross, stories in which - more often than not - the Devil shows up. Reading these texts helps us to find the everyday ways we are distracted from God's calling.

[Scripture Slide] This week, we'll be in John 2. This is one text that doesn't feature the devil, but you won't even miss him. Because this is the Cleansing of the Temple, or as some scholars call it, Jesus' Temple Tantrum. As you're turning there, a little background:

In John's Gospel, this is like the second thing Jesus does. He's called his disciples and done one miracle - turned water into wine. And then he comes to the Temple and cleanses it. Basically right away.

It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover celebration, so Jesus went to Jerusalem. In the Temple area he saw merchants selling cattle, sheep, and doves for sacrifices; he also saw dealers at tables exchanging foreign money. Jesus made a whip from some ropes and chased them all out of the Temple. He drove out the sheep and cattle, scattered the money changers' coins over the floor, and turned over their tables. Then, going over to the people who sold doves, he told them, "Get these things out of here. Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" Then his disciples remembered this prophecy from the Scriptures: "Passion for God's house will consume me."

We have an image of Jesus cleansing the Temple that is pretty disturbing if you think about it. We picture Jesus sort of casually strolling into the Temple and catching sight of all these merchants selling animals. They're cheating the poor, counting stacks of gold coins, laughing manically and twirling their moustaches evilly. Jesus hulks out, rips off his shirt and, like an ancient Schwarzenegger, starts flipping tables, punching evil merchants and throwing goats out of the Temple. And none of his disciples are freaked out by this at all.

If this strikes you as very out of character for Jesus, you're right! And a big red flag that this reading isn't maybe totally accurate is that it's used by Christians whenever we pop off at someone. As long as we can claim our anger is righteous, we can point at SchwarzenChrist to justify whatever we do to the objects of our anger.

But if you want a big clue that we're reading the story wrong, look at how the Jewish leaders respond to Jesus:

But the Jewish leaders demanded, "What are you doing? If God gave you authority to do this, show us a miraculous sign to prove it."

Everyone is just curious about what he's doing. Jesus isn't arrested or thrown out of the Temple. They all just want to *talk*. More specifically, they want to know if he has the authority to do what he's doing.

So what is he doing?

That's the million dollar question. The traditional answer has been that Jesus is protesting the injustice happening in the Temple - that all these money changers and people selling animals are ripping off the poor, that they all need to go. But that's not exactly true for a couple of reasons.

First, this is Passover. It's the biggest Jewish holiday, and it's centered at the Temple, for the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. Jews from all over *the world* travelled to Jerusalem to worship at Passover. There were *thousands* of people in the Temple courtyard every day.

This courtyard, by the way, was the Court of the Gentiles. The Temple was where God's physical presence lived on Earth, and the closer you got to the center - the holiest place, where God lived, the fewer people could go there. So in the very center, only the high priest could go, and only once a year on another holiday called the Day of Atonement. The inside of the Temple proper was only accessible to priests. The first outside court was the Court of Men (yup, only Jewish men). Then came the Court of Women (for Jewish women). And finally, the last space was called the Court of the Gentiles. It was for anyone who wasn't a Jew.

If you weren't a descendant of Abraham, this was as close to the God who created you as you could get. And it was *huge* - picture a space that would hold nearly two football fields.

So picture that big a space *packed* with Jews from all over the world. Passover required them to give sacrifices that were pure, unblemished, uninjured. The only way for these pilgrims to do that was to buy animals in Jerusalem.

And just like when we travel internationally, they had to exchange money. The Temple had its own money. But of course that money had to be exchanged. Both the selling of animals and the exchanging of the money *had* to happen if the Passover sacrifices were to be observed. They were a good, regular part of the Jewish worship celebration.

Was some injustice happening? Sure, probably. In a crowd of *thousands upon thousands*, it almost certainly was. But as a rule, the selling of animals and the changing of money was just business as usual.

Here's why all of that is so fascinating: given the massive size of the Court of the Gentiles, the number of pilgrims and the very mild reaction of the authorities to Jesus' actions, it doesn't seem that Jesus actually cleared out the whole Court of Gentiles. There's basically no way he could have. And it doesn't seem like that was his intention.

Jesus wasn't protesting the specific behaviors in the Court of the Gentiles. He was protesting the very establishment of the Temple itself. He was acting out God's judgment on the current state of things. He was acting out a coming destruction of the Temple.

The religious leaders got it. They didn't respond to him like he was a ruffian throwing a tantrum or a dangerous vandal. They responded to him like he was a self-proclaimed prophet. When they said, "If God gave you the authority to do this, give us a sign," they were following what the Bible said to do with prophets. Moses' Law says if a prophet makes a proclamation, to ask for a sign. And then if the sign comes true, believe the prophet because he's from God. If not, you actually are supposed to stone him to death. So high stakes.

The religious leaders saw Jesus' actions, understood he was offering a prophetic judgment, and did what they were supposed to do. They asked for a sign. Jesus responded in a typically cryptic way:

“All right,” Jesus replied. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

“What!” they exclaimed. “It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can rebuild it in three days?”

But when Jesus said “this temple,” he meant his own body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he had said this, and they believed both the Scriptures and what Jesus had said. -- John 2:13-22

Jesus points to his own resurrection as the sign that this old way of being religious is on its way out (we'll come back to that). But I want to push on how we know the Temple religion was ineffective.

The Temple points back to the Tabernacle, which was the tent God told Moses to build so God could live among the people of Israel. Essentially, the Tabernacle made it safe for God to live on Earth among us, rather than staying up in Heaven or on a Mountain (if you remember Debbie's message from the end of Epiphany).

But the ultimate goal of the Law and the Tabernacle and the Temple wasn't just so God could live among the Jews. It was so the Jews, these sons and daughters of Abraham, could fulfill God's promise to Abraham - that God would use them to bless the whole world. That's why, when God gave Israel the Law through Moses, God said, "I will make you a kingdom of priests." The ultimate goal was that the whole world would come to know God through Israel.

But now look at the Temple in Jesus' day: There's one spot in the whole world where these Gentiles can come get close to this God. It's the Court of the Gentiles. That's it. If you're one of God's people, then your calling, your mission, your ultimate goal, is to live in such a way that you are a beacon, a lighthouse, shining the light of God's love into the world such that these Gentiles are drawn like moths to the light, closer and closer and closer until they come to this court of Gentiles.

But Israel had forgotten that calling. And their religion became about themselves, rather than about the world they had been called to bless. How do we know? Because they filled up the Court of the Gentiles with good things - money changing and selling sacrificial animals. But it was filled up nonetheless. God forbid any Gentiles actually come to worship this God - they'd have nowhere to be.

Jesus comes to clean away the clutter. To drive out all this good religious stuff because while it might be good, it doesn't belong *here*. And it's actually getting in the way of the people's original calling.

Now, when we read this story, we all like to imagine we're standing behind Jesus, whips in hand, ready to rage against injustice just like him. But a fairer question would be to ask, "What does Jesus need to cleanse in ME?" Is it possible that, like the Jewish people, I've forgotten my first calling? Is it possible that I've cluttered my life with a bunch of *good* things that are nevertheless getting in the way of the life God wants for me?

Is it possible that I've filled my time with too many commitments to do the thing God asks of me? Is it possible I spend so much that I can't give to the things God invites me to?

Friends, it's easy to cut out the bad stuff. It's easy to say, "Oh I watch too much TV" or "I really should go out to eat less." Those things are true, and even then, we find it hard not to continue in those things. It's much harder to say no to the good things - drawing better boundaries at work, or with our kids' activities.

The word I'd like to introduce is Space. That's what was missing in the Court of the Gentiles - there was no space for Israel to be who God had called them to be. So Jesus had to come in and make space (which, by the way, he did by doing more than just clearing out some standing room in the Court of Gentiles. As God, he burst forth from the temple so all us Gentiles could do more than just stand near him - we could be wrapped up into his loving embrace, share fully in the life and calling of his people!).

How much margin do you have in your schedule? What about in your finances?

If you're anything like me, you probably live at 100%. You're going all the time, always on, always moving, scheduled from the time you get up to the time you fall into bed. Or you're living paycheck-to-paycheck, hoping you have some money left at the end of the month.

I don't have to tell you how stressful that is. You live it. You know it.

What you may not have thought about is that when we live without margin, we're also trapped. We're not free to be who God calls us to be. We're not free to act as God invites us to act. We're not free to invest where God calls us to invest.

<Social Media and Sabbatical>

God didn't create us to live at 100% all the time. God calls us to reserve 1/7th of our time in Sabbath (that's almost 15%). God calls us to share 10% of our income with others. That's not because God needs our time or money. It's because to be human is to be generous, to have space to share. And when we don't have that space, we're not living fully human lives.

Jesus knows that destroys us, so he comes to us to clear out space in our lives.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus offers his death to clear away what doesn't belong.

Assignment + Blessing

Margin Tracker + Prayer: "God, cleanse me of that which gets in the way of what you're calling me to!"