**March 4, 2018**

**John 2:13-22; Psalm 134**

This was Jesus’ first public act in his ministry in the Gospel of John. You know what they say about first impressions? Well, this was certainly one to go down in history. The other Gospel writers recorded this as part of the events in Holy Week, but John told it as part of Jesus’ entry into active ministry. He called the disciples, they went to a wedding (where they ran out of wine), and then they came to the temple. Jesus quite literally whipped them into shape. He showed them that he wasn’t a normal teacher to remain sequestered in the classroom. Jesus wasn’t a priest who preached empty words. He wasn’t a King who sent minions out to do the work of ruling the people. Jesus came for action. He came to clean up their act – literally and metaphorically. He came to help them and show them a better way. For the old system needed an overhaul. Faithful followers of God needed to get with the new program.

Jesus literally moved the offensive actions, people, and animals outside the temple. There was no room for empty ritual in the temple. There was no reason for people to spend money on the props or pomp and circumstance. They could not pay a price for salvation. The Savior was not for sale.

From the people’s perspective, it must have been confusing and downright offensive. They weren’t doing anything bad. They were preparing for worship. They were preparing their sacrifices. They had gone out of their way to travel into Jerusalem, spending time and money on what they believed to be a righteous task. And by doing this, they would be freed to live clean and holy lives. This would restore broken relationships between themselves and God, as well as relationships with their spouses and children and neighbors and beyond. So Jesus wasn’t just creating an awkward moment for the Temple community, but he “had gone from preaching to meddling.” He messed up their opportunity to make things right within their spiritual and daily lives.

But Jesus couldn’t abide it. Without an eloquent introduction or a heartfelt plea for folks to try another way, he swept it all out the front door. No more money. No more animals. No more sacrifices. No more. These rituals, long ago enacted faithfully, had become empty and meaningless. The people still needed a way to be cleansed of their wrongdoings. The people still clamored for God’s salvation. They needed forgiveness and atonement (a setting things right with God), but what they had been doing wasn’t enough. God saw the people’s struggles and found a better way to love them and cleanse them and free them. God re-formed the practice of sacrifice so that God was both the priest receiving payment for sins **and** the sacrifice upon the altar. The way to salvation still cost something, but it was not a price for people to pay. The price was one that God bore alone.

Perhaps it angered Jesus to see how cheaply people valued their salvation? Perhaps it hurt to consider that his life was now the cost for this empty ritual? Like any parent who shares a wonderful gift with their child, then finds it thoughtlessly left out in the rain or carried around by the dog; or like a fashion designer crafting gorgeous gowns for someone who is content in sweat pants -- God brought the best only to find that the people are clueless about the value of themselves and their salvation.

Let this be clear from the text: we are worth more to God than a little dove or lamb. God loved us enough to send the best. And even though it must have been frustrating and disappointing and heart-breaking to God when the Plan B didn’t work, God still loved us enough to not abandon us to the mess we made. God loved us enough to make a Plan C. God didn’t wait for us to figure it out. God didn’t wait for us to make the quota on atoning sacrifices. God rolled up his sleeves and came after us. That is the price of salvation.

The question then comes to us: do we acknowledge the cost of our salvation? Do we honor the price that was paid for each of us, and for all of us? Do we bring thankful hearts or are we simply seeking to “check the box” when we come to worship? Particularly when our congregation worships together, are we glorifying to God? Or have we, too, ritualized our worship to the extent that it is now thoughtless and empty? When we sing a hymn together, do the words and music enrich our relationship with God, or do we first think about whether or not *we* like the song? When we hold silence together, are we listening for God’s voice to speak, or are we counting the moments until *we* can speak again? Do we eat the bread and drink the wine just because it’s here? How can we come to this Table as grateful and desperate for the taste as we were in times of greatest need? How can we reclaim the sacrifice made for us?

What spring cleaning would Jesus do within our community today? What needs to be moved or removed within us, that we might serve God with our whole heart and mind and strength?

Every Presbyterian Church elects officers to lead their congregation and participate in the larger governing process of the denomination. These officers are first and foremost the spiritual leaders of the church. Their job is rooted in faith, not business. According to our constitution, “elders are so named because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life… Elders exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline, and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation, as well as the whole church and ecumenical relationships.” [[1]](#footnote-1) This means that our Elders at Sweet Hollow are called to have a larger vision, beyond themselves and our *status quo*. They are called to look beyond our preferences and habits, and see with God’s eyes. Church officers point us to the best of what we are, and the best of what we can be. They must listen for the places in our lives where God is at work, scrubbing and moving furniture and even throwing out the much-loved but completely worn out furniture. So when our church officers listen to God and point us toward whatever new thing God is doing in our midst, we may be pushed outside of our comfort zone. That’s why we are called “re-formed” Christians; we believe that God continues to speak to us and cleanse us and even whip us into shape. And we boldly follow.

[[[ The same thing happens at the Presbytery level of the Church. About two years ago, a Presbytery meeting became a little contentious. People on Long Island were divided about how we receive Communion. Some argued that baptism was a requirement for Communion, while others disagreed. Although there is a historical precedent for “requiring” baptism, it is not how the Presbyterian Church currently practices or understands Communion. We do not prioritize one Sacrament over the other. Instead, we trust in God’s grace. We believe that God desires to be in relationship with all people, and that God may choose to introduce God’s self to someone in the sacrament of Communion. Whereas Elders in Presbyterian Churches used to visit all members in the week before Communion, hear their request to receive the sacrament, and then give each member an actual token that would be presented at the Communion Table as their meal ticket – that is no longer done. While we do keep rolls of baptized members, and we do keep a record of how many members attend Communion, we do not prevent any one person from receiving the sacrament. God reformed us. God turned our Tables around so that all are welcome – guests and members alike, those who confessed their sins and those who did not. There is no gate-keeper but Christ. There is no judge but the Lord. What people choose to do (or not do) in the sacrament of Communion is strictly between themselves and God. ]]]

Lent is an ideal time to reflect on the things that get in the way of our relationship with God. Early in the first centuries of the Church, these weeks were set aside for the faithful to journey to the cross and empty tomb with Jesus. People wanted to honor and participate in Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. They wanted to feel the price of salvation, so they made intentional (though obviously token) sacrifices in their own lives: abstaining from meat and frivolity and sex and singing “alleluia” and wearing bright colors and all the other simple, happy things that we do. They stopped doing these fun things before Easter to feel and pay a personal cost of God’s salvation. The church suffered in a small way as they marched toward Easter, when the feast would return and Christians could revel with abandon. We do not want to arrive empty handed at the tomb. We do not want God’s sacrifice to be overlooked or undervalued.

If you have not yet found a way to mark these Lenten days, let me encourage each of us to find some way to reflect on, experience, and honor God’s sacrifice. Perhaps you will make a sacrifice of your own for these remaining days until Easter Sunday. Take time to listen to God’s voice. Take time to read God’s word. Take time to serve. Make a sacrifice not because it is a historical tradition, but as a way to understand and personalize the cost of our own salvation.

And let us pray that the sacrifice we make each day and each week – our prayers, our hymns, our words and thoughts – would be acceptable and pleasing to God. May we be open to the Spirit’s spring cleaning, willing to set everything aside in order that we might better honor and glorify our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. G-2.03 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)