

Third Sunday in Lent  
I Corinthians 1:18-15, Psalm 19, John 2:13-22  
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Every year just before Christmas, the Pope gathers with the leading Bishops and Cardinals in the Vatican for what has been called his “Christmas Greetings.” This past December, Pope Francis delivered a message that was anything but what we might call greetings to the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome. One newspaper headline read, “Pope Blasts Top Bureaucrats at the Vatican!”

Pope Francis addressed the Curia, as they are called, using unflattering terms such as “spiritual Alzheimer’s,” “funeral-faced” and “terrorism of gossip” to describe their ungodly behavior. He accused them of lusting for power, rivalry and boasting, stiffness, hardness and arrogance, indifference and exhibitionism. Pope Francis said they were too busy and didn’t take enough time to rest and planned so excessively that the Holy Spirit wasn’t free to operate. Further, they had lost touch with reality, lacked the joy of the Lord and sought worldly profit.

The Pope’s Christmas Greeting was a scathing critique of a diseased and sick body at the head of the Catholic Church. When I heard about it and read more about his address, I was immediately reminded of Jesus cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem. Pope Francis was cleansing the Vatican in Rome. While Francis used sharply crafted words to convey his unhappiness with the performance of his top leadership team, Jesus used a whip of cords to get his point across.

Drawings or models of the expansive Temple in Jerusalem show that it consisted of several open air courts surrounding the Holy of Holies. The largest and outermost court was called the Court of the Gentiles. Here Jews and Gentiles, men, women and Greeks could gather for prayer and study.

The next inner court was called the Court of the Women. Only Jewish men and women could pass into this courtyard, and women could go no closer to the Holy of Holies than this.

The next smaller court was called the Court of the Men, where only Jewish men could gather, but they could go no further. Beyond here was the main altar and other altars where the animal sacrifices took place. They were performed by the hundreds of priests that served the Temple.

And finally, there was a somewhat small but predominant, tall, ornate building called the Holy of Holies or the Tabernacle. Within it was the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the stone tablets with the 10 commandments. It was believed to be the throne of the Jewish God, Yahweh, and the residing place of the Most Holy. Here God dwelt on earth with his people, the

nation of Israel. The High Priest was the only person allowed in this building and only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

During the Passover, the Temple grounds would have been packed with Jewish pilgrims and non-Jewish worshippers from all over the known world. If you have seen pictures of Mecca during the Muslim holy days, you have a sense of the crowds that occupied the Temple grounds. Now imagine a stockyard of cows and sheep and cages of doves sharing the same space in the Court of the Gentiles. Consider the noises and smells coming from those animals – all this while people are trying to pray or read scripture.

Is it any wonder Jesus was infuriated? Yes, people needed animals to make the appropriate sacrifices as outlined in the Jewish Law or Torah. And yes, they could only buy them with money that didn't have the heads of foreign rulers on them. But the selling and buying of livestock and the exchanging of coins had come to dominate these sacred grounds to such an extent that the main purpose – that this was the very presence of God – was lost.

I read that some devout Jews will not step on the smallest scrap of paper but instead will pick it up, just in case it might have the name of God on it. Such reverence is not a bad thing. Isn't that also why we don't allow adults or children to casually bring food or drinks into the church. This space is a holy room set aside for the worship of our triune God.

Our Psalm this morning, in the first few verses, describes with poetic flair, the grandeur of Creation. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork." (Psalm 19:1) In other words, the earth and sky reveal God's majesty. The Temple was holy for sure. Our churches are sacred spaces as well. All of creation is God's work and therefore to be revered, cared for and preserved. What would Jesus say about how we have treated our air, rivers, forests, oceans and wildlife?

Back in the Temple, when Jesus is asked what sign or credentials he can show for having started a stampede and acting as a one-man wrecking ball, he gives an answer sure to confuse and befuddle them. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

We, the reader, know he meant his body. We also know he will much later in John's gospel be arrested and crucified during another Passover festival and rise after three days. St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Corinth, states that the cross is foolishness to nonbelievers. How can anyone follow a man who died a scandalous death, one reserved for only the most criminal or rebellious? How can one follow a loser, one defeated and humiliated by powerful Rome?

The cross only makes sense because we know that this particular death was anything but a defeat. It was rather the offering up of a sacred life to reveal a love for humankind greater than the world has ever known. On the cross, Jesus is demonstrating that there is no limit to how far

God will go to assure us of his commitment to favor us forever. What greater love is there than for God to give up divine life for his friends?

Our response must be to return love and devotion in part by cleansing our own temples. Whether we're talking about our faith communities as God's temples or our individual lives as temples of the Holy Spirit, both need examining. Have we accumulated excessive clutter that is crowding out our time for prayer, study, communal worship and service? Is there too much noise in our lives prohibiting us from ever hearing God's voice? Do we spend too much time and attention tending our money?

In the letter of First Peter, the church is described as a spiritual house built with spiritual stones. We each need to do our part to make ourselves sturdy in our faith and sound in our practice of Christian love for this house to stand firm. The Temple in Jerusalem is gone. Let's not suffer the same fate. AMEN.