

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**March 11, 2012**  
**John 2:13-22**  
**“A Healing Journey: Cleansing & Construction”**

Ask any doctor or nurse; ask any mother or father with their boxes of Band-Aids and tubes of Bactine and Neosporin: You need to cleanse a wound in order for it to heal. Remove the splinter, wash off the dirt, put some antiseptic spray on it. Cleansing reduces the chance of serious infection. Cleansing allows for proper healing. Cleansing comes first. But what if the wound isn't an obvious one? What if the wound didn't occur in one dramatic moment, but came slowly over time, working its destructive ways bit by bit, little by little, day by day? The gospel lesson tells about Jesus cleansing the temple in Jerusalem, a place wounded and in need of reform. The gospel lesson also talks about us, in many ways just as wounded and in need of reform. Let's start with the temple but be ready for when the focus shifts back to us.

The city of Jerusalem during the Passover festival was a bee-hive of activity. The streets were swarming with crowds. Pilgrims and travelers from all over came for Passover, the remembrance of when Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. To get to the Temple, you had to walk right by Antonia Fortress, the army barracks for Roman soldiers. The centurions were always tense during these festivals, knowing how the yoke of Roman rule chafed and irritated the oppressed Jewish people.

In the Temple itself, tensions of a different sort were played out. People were expected to pay a half-shekel temple tax upon their arrival. But they couldn't use coins stamped with human images of the Roman leaders; so they had to exchange them for coins acceptable in the Temple treasury. And people were expected to bring sacrifices to the temple, so most of them waited to purchase cattle, sheep, and pigeons until they got there. But recently, the high priest Caiaphas had clashed with others in the ruling council. So he'd decided to allow rival merchants to set up stalls within the temple confines as a rebuke to the existing merchants, who supported Caiaphas' opponents. (Sounds just like the games of modern politics.) Such was the scene Jesus encountered: a packed city, tense Roman soldiers, streets crowded with pilgrims, competing merchants and dishonest profiteers, noisy cattle and sheep and incessant shouts from the marketplace – all converging on the temple built to honor the Lord Most High.

The wounds here had occurred slowly, incrementally. Roman oppression and taxation and military pressure felt a bit worse each passing year. The merchants in the temple and the debasing of the Lord's house had happened little by little. But because these were incremental changes, they felt unavoidable; and if unavoidable, that must be normal; and if normal, then they must be necessary and inevitable and simply the way things are meant to be. So how do you cleanse a wound when you don't notice you're being wounded?



Lots of wounds happen incrementally. *Personal* wounds: the little lie quickly told, the slight fudging of numbers with the office petty cash, the vague answers on our tax returns, the pouring of a second drink when we'd promised ourselves we'd only have one tonight. *Political* wounds: such as government intrusion into the very private matter involving abortions, first hindered by limiting access to services, then by requiring waiting periods and talks about gestational cycles, followed now in some state laws by mandatory ultrasounds and more invasive procedures. Or political wounds such as the desire to avoid campaign finance reform, which led to claims that the First Amendment protects unlimited campaign contributions, which led to the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, followed now by Super PACS pouring millions of dollars into attack ads that will only get worse between now and November. *Religious* wounds: denominations in competition with one another, year after year maintaining segregated worship services and a basic distrust of other churches and faith traditions. *National* wounds, too: engaging in wars overseas despite lacking necessary Congressional authorization, a fault of both Republican and Democrat administrations over the last 40 years, which has led to preemptive wars against perceived threats, implemented without resorting to a national draft and more recently with the expanded use of robotic drone flights and bombing runs.

*Personal* wounds: lies, drugs, alcohol. *Political* wounds: abortion, campaign finances. *Religious* wounds: homophobia, xenophobia. *National* wounds: military abuses of power, war and violence. Believe me, anything I might say today from the pulpit pales in comparison to what Jesus did that day in the Jerusalem temple. Under the literal shadow of the Roman barracks and oppression, Jesus started a riot. It was so bad that later, when his accusers wanted to ensure Jesus was crucified by the Romans, they used Jesus' actions on this day as the basis for sentencing him to capital punishment. His accusers testified: "He said he would destroy this temple and build another one in three days"; "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Mk 14:58, 15:13) In the temple courtyard, Jesus overturned tables and created a huge scene. Jesus knew that wounds needed to be named and then needed to be cleansed. And because they had been inflicted incrementally, he first had to point out how serious the wounds were in order to provoke people to action and start making things better.

So what do we do with these wounds to help them heal? Band-Aids and Bactine for drug addictions, political malfeasance, military over-reach, and religious oppression? I don't think so. On that day long ago, Jesus pointed out the wounds with deep passion; that's why they quoted the old prophet Zechariah's words about how "Zeal for the Lord's house will consume me." But then Jesus' critics said to him: "What's next? Why should we listen to you or change things just because of your diagnosis?" *First*, the short answer: Jesus looked to his critics, looked at the mess in the temple and the Roman barracks and said in effect, "None of this has ultimate power or authority. These temples of stone and of flesh will be destroyed. But one temple, my body, will be raised up again. And that will change everything; heal everything; make all things new."



Now, the *longer* answer: Wherever there are deep wounds in our life or in society, healing requires a new foundation. A new perspective and faith that sees things with God-given hope and spirit-given wisdom. Martin Niemoeller was a Lutheran pastor who opposed Adolf Hitler and was put in the Dachau concentration camp for almost eight years. He spent much of that time in isolated confinement. Through a small opening in the wall of his prison cell, he could see the wooden gallows in the courtyard. Niemoeller knew that he might be hanged on those gallows any day. But as he endured the days and weeks and months, he realized that he did not fear dying so much. What he feared was that, when they put the noose around his neck, he would say to his Nazi executioner, "There is a God in heaven and God is going to get you." Niemoeller commented, "If I had said that, how far my death would have been from the one I call Lord. If Jesus Christ had died that way, there would be no preaching of the cross, no forgiveness, no reconciliation from God. The greatest lesson of life is to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. God is not even the enemy of God's own enemies."<sup>1</sup> That insight, that amazing reversal of perspective, can lead to tremendous healing.

Notice that in the story of Jesus causing such a disruption in the temple, no one questions him when he says he will destroy the temple. Tearing things down is easy in this world. Slander and false charges work well to tear down people. Suicide bombs and nuclear weapons work quite well to tear down nations. Bribes and extortion and undisclosed political campaign contributions can tear down lots of things quite effectively. But what they challenged Jesus about was his assertion that in three days he would raise the destroyed temple back up. Building things up is always what people find hard to believe...hard to trust...hard to have faith in.

Yet that is precisely what Jesus offers, beginning with himself: his own body, destroyed on a cross, defeated by the world's categories. Another wound in a long, global history of woundedness. But on the third day, he arose, offering a different end to the old story, a fresh perspective, a resurrection hope built upon a foundation that lifts us up in our lives, us in our churches, us and billions of people of faith who've lived from that day and will live long into the future yet to come.

Jesus didn't overturn the tables in the temple that day out of blind anger. He was cleaning a wound. And once cleansed, he boldly announced: Whatever you have imagined to be powerful and eternal is actually neither. In place of a temple of stone, think of me. In place of a policy or ritual or plan of attack or a life marked by fear and anxiety, think of me. For I die and yet will live forevermore. I have overcome the world and healed all the old wounds. The splits between us, between you and others, between you and God: All that can now be healed. The passage ends, "After Jesus was raised from the dead, they remembered he had said all this and they believed what Jesus had spoken." May the same be said of us.

---

<sup>1</sup>Charles McRiddle, *Christian Ministry*, May/June 1987, p. 33.

