

***“Cleanse Your Life”***

You may remember the couple, Stan and Jan Berenstain. They authored a series of children’s books called The Berenstain Bears. The stories were all wonderful lessons of life for young children as Mama and Papa Berenstain Bear along with Brother Bear and Sister Bear encountered things like a bad dream, trouble at school, and going to the dentist.

One of their best stories was “The Berenstain Bears and the Messy Room.” It is a lesson about house cleaning. The introduction warns: *“When small bears forget to pick up, store and stash, Some of their favorite things end up in the trash.”* The crisis in the story comes when Mama Bear gets fed up with the mess in Brother and Sister’s room; it is just too much to take. It goes this way: *“Well, the mess just seemed to build up and build up until one day...maybe it was because Mama’s back was a little stiff, or maybe it was stepping on Brother’s airplane cement, or maybe she was just fed up with that messy room, but whatever it was...Mama Bear lost her temper! She stormed into the cub’s room with a big box. ‘The first thing we need to do is get rid of all this junk!’ she said. Brother and Sister were watching in horror as Mama began to throw things into the box.”*

It reminded me of the time I took a snow shovel to the debris in our daughters’ room because I couldn’t make my way to the storage closet on the far side of the room. I shoveled a path through the room by tossing it all down the stairwell. That didn’t get the mess cleaned up, but it was, for me, emotionally cathartic.

It’s like that sometimes with our lives, isn’t it? Things pile up until it is just too much to take. We have to clean up the mess. Whether it is a messy room or a messy set of circumstances at work or at home, the time comes when we just want the mess cleaned up.

A mess devalues something of worth. It might be a room we want to enjoy or a household where we want some peace and quiet. But, when

it's messy, it can't serve its intended purpose. A former member (mindful, I suspect, of the status of my desk and office) sent me an e-mail with pictures of famous people's desks: Conservative apologist William F. Buckley, writer Nat Hentoff, and the noted scientist, Albert Einstein — all of them piled high with what looks like unmanageable junk.

I admit that I have a messy desk. Someday I am going to clean my messy desk, but I never seem to get around to it and I can only imagine how nice it would be to have a whole desk top on which to write. I have a sign that reads "*A clean desk is the sign of a sick mind,*" but half the time I don't know where it is . . . so I guess my mind is in decent shape.

There are times when a mess can be so serious that nothing but a radical housecleaning will correct the situation. That's the premise of the TV show *Hoarders*, and it is what today's Gospel is all about.

Jesus finds a horrible mess in the temple and becomes very angry. He actually took a whip and drove the merchants out of the temple courtyard where they were conducting business. He overturned the tables where the accountants were making change and he told the merchants to take their merchandise away. You have to picture the scene to even begin to appreciate the spiritual bombshell Jesus set off with his actions: The moneychangers scrambling after their coins; the people who came to the temple standing in shock; and the officials frozen with rage and indignation would have been something to see. "*Who in the world does this peasant from Galilee think he is?*" This isn't the "Gentle Jesus meek and mild" we are accustomed to sing about.

What is it that has created such passion in Him? "*The disciples,*" John records, "*Remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'*" [Psalm 69:9] Jesus says the center of Israel's worship life, the temple, has become a marketplace οικον εμποριου (oikon emporiou). They have turned the church into a department store. It is as though, when no one was looking, someone or something robbed the reverence of the people of God and displaced the worship of God with the whims of human desire.

Why was Jesus so enraged? The scene that confronts Jesus as he goes to the temple is representative of the whole corruption of Israel's religious life. His conflict is with a system and with religious officials who are, by their actions, breaking every one of the first three commandments! We have to look closely at our today's First Lesson to get the connection between the Decalogue (10 commandments) and Jesus' cleansing of the temple. The first three commandments are all about the holiness and sovereignty of God. Nothing is to take center stage in our living but the Lord God — there is, and can be, no other god. We must not take the name of the Lord in vain — or as the NRSV correctly expands this concept, ***“You must not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord...”*** And, we are to keep the Sabbath — or worship on a day set apart for God.

It's all about reverencing God. With all the buying and selling and money changing, the temple system had become corrupt. Instead of contributing to the worship and reverence of God, it missed the point. The idea of money changing began with good intentions — instead of using pagan money to buy offerings, the pilgrims would exchange their worldly money for temple money. The problem was, the system was a setup for corruption: the price of a pair of turtle doves gets jacked up a little here... the exchange of money is tilted a little in favor of the money changer there...soon the thing that was supposed to facilitate the worship and reverence of God was turned into something that cheated people and made it more difficult to approach a Holy God.

It's all about wrongfully using the name of the Lord. In God's name, people were being deprived of their livelihoods; in God's name, a price was being placed on how pious you would be considered to be; in God's name, you were being led into the false notion that there was a distinction between where God could be found and where He did not enter our lives; In God's name, the equally opposite message was conveyed: your worship life is nothing different than your secular life.

It is important to realize that there are different kinds of messes that

require different methods of housecleaning. There are physical messes, emotional messes, and spiritual messes. All of them have a few principles in common.

Messes build up slowly over time. We don't notice a bit of dust here, a pile of papers there until gradually we can be no longer oblivious to the mess that is quite evident to others.

The longer we live with a mess, the easier it becomes to live with it. The longer we live with a mess, the more difficult it is to do the housecleaning.

If we do not clean up our messes, they will finally destroy us in much the same way that the temple system ended up destroying the worship and reverence of God.

What does spiritual housecleaning look like for you and me? Do you remember the saying: "*When all else fails . . . [read the directions]*"? There are those who would encourage us to "read the directions," that is, go back to Exodus 20 to "*read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest*" the rules. The danger in doing that is precisely the system against which Jesus was reacting: a system of rules that get amended, revised, interpreted, and finally reshaped to suit those who wish not to have to obey them.

The problem in Judaism in Jesus' day was not an absence of rules — I used to have in my office on the second shelf eighteen volumes bound in maroon. It was a Talmud with enough rules to keep you busy for months just reading them, much less observing them. And for each rule there is rabbinic commentary on how that rule applies in this situation — often conflicting commentaries on the same page: Rabbi Eliezer says it's okay to milk a goat while wearing a yamulke; Rabbi Dimi regards this to be an abomination. And there is another whole set of books called the Midrash which tell stories to illuminate the rules; and another set called Mishnah, which relates the oral traditions of Judaism. No, the problem in Judaism was most definitely not a lack of rules.

Rules are important for an orderly society. Rules help us to know where the boundaries are, especially the boundaries that define where I begin and you end. Rules are especially important for the young and the uninitiated — they help to negotiate the vagaries of corporate living. Rules can be especially helpful when you hit a snag, and aren't quite sure what to do (I have often said that Robert's Rules of Order should be left on the shelf, until you absolutely need it).

Rules are important; but we are not saved by rules, or by keeping rules. When Jesus was asked which was the most important rule, He replied: ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”*** [Luke 10:27] Two things about that rule: 1) It tells you to do something; it does not tell you to stop or desist from doing something (most rules tend to have a negative cast to them). 2) It tells you to do something that you, quite frankly, cannot do. How can I be commanded to love? Somebody lies to me, cheats me out of thousands of dollars, robs my identity, burns down my house, and runs off my cats . . . how do I love that person?

Here's our dilemma: We keep turning love into an emotion; Jesus kept turning it into actions. How do I love that lying, cheating, robbing, arson-loving, cat-hating person? I forgive her. If I can't quite get to forgiveness (and let's be honest, it can be hard, especially when the wounds are fresh), I can at least absolve her (forgiveness is a process; absolving is simply the declaration that I will not hold this against you or try to even the score). If I cannot absolve, I will pray to want to absolve; and if I can't pray that, I will pray to want to want to absolve. Is that love? Not yet, but it is movement in that direction.

On Ash Wednesday, we began our Lenten journey with this exhortation: *“As disciples of the Lord Jesus we are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor. Repentance, fasting, prayer, and works of love — the discipline of Lent — help us to wage our spiritual warfare.”* I invite you to examine the

evenness of that counsel. There are two inner disciplines invoked: repentance and fasting. There are then two external disciplines: prayer and works of love.

We need to attend to our inner life: Repentance helps us to see what is amiss or awry so that we can move from it to what is healthy and productive. Since ancient times, fasting has been known to open the spiritual senses to greater impact from the divine (fasting is not a popular American pastime, as our obesity epidemic reveals). Prayer is often considered something for the inner life, as well, but if your prayer life is focused primarily on you, something is out of kilter.

Prayer is most powerful when directed toward the needs of others. It is not wrong to pray for yourself; you need God's help as much as anybody, and nobody knows that better than you. But to give the majority of prayer time on behalf of others is a real blessing, for yourself and for them. But don't spend all of your prayer time in petitions and intercessions — you need time in prayer for thanksgiving, praise, adoration, and simply being with God.

“Works of love” is a huge category, because it encompasses so many possibilities; it is truly as endless as human need. The sick need attending to — some nurses are present; they do that, but that's not what I mean . . . I mean things like a visit, a meal prepared, a card sent to cheer. The down-and-out need to be brought up and in: direct care, if you can; a check to some worthy charity really helps; volunteer hours to stuff envelopes, make phone calls, help in a kitchen, show how to knit, or paint, or do car repair . . . in your prayer life ask the Spirit to direct you to some place that needs the unique set of gifts you have been provided.

There is a suggestion in the March newsletter to employ the bulletin board in the fellowship Hall to let others know about a way you could help someone with a skill you have, or time you could give, to help another — OR let others know about volunteer opportunities in the community where they could plug in. Such self-giving is cleansing, so cleansing it cannot be confined to just a “Lenten discipline” but a life-

long discipline.

St. Augustine wrote: *“Hope has two beautiful daughters: Anger, so that what must not be cannot be; and Courage, so that what can be will be.”* Jesus displayed both anger and courage as He drove the merchants from His Father’s house. As His followers, we must display both, as well: *“Anger, so that what must not be cannot be; and Courage, so that what can be will be.”*

Amen.