

Now that the calendar has flipped over to March and the first day of spring is only a few weeks away, many of us are probably already thinking about doing some spring cleaning of our houses. It's a ritual that most of us go through every spring. We open up the windows and let the warm breezes blow through our house to clean away all of the stale winter air. We blow out all of the germs and viral bugs that bring winter sicknesses. We plant flowers. We paint walls. We fix up and clean up so that our residences can be healthy places in which to live and inviting places for others to visit.

It's funny how things tend to build up since the last time we performed a spring cleaning. It's such a subtle process. A little dust and dirt build up on the baseboards and in the hard-to-reach nooks and crannies of each room. Dust bunnies, or maybe dust bears, accumulate under our bed. Cobwebs hang from the ceiling. It doesn't matter how clean we think our houses are. These things happen so slowly that we hardly notice. Until, one day, an alarm goes off and we come to our senses. We realize it's time to do some spring cleaning and put our houses back in order.

In today's Gospel, Jesus realized it was time to do some spring cleaning and put His Father's house back in order. Passover, you'll remember, was one of the holiest feast days of the Jewish faith. It celebrated the night on which God liberated the slaves in Egypt, sending the angel of death through the streets taking the life of every first-born male, but passing over the homes of the Israelites, on which the blood of the lamb was smeared on the door. Passover came in the spring of the year, when travel conditions were at their best. Tens of thousands of faithful pilgrims would flock to the temple from all over the Mediterranean to celebrate Passover, making their sacrifices to God and paying their half shekel temple tax.

Now, think about the logistics. It's estimated that the population of Jerusalem would swell from 50,000 to 180,000 at Passover. Pilgrims would come from as far away as Persia, Syria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. That was a lot of hungry mouths to feed and a lot of weary travelers to put up for the night. Plus, they came to the temple to make a sacrifice. They needed an unblemished animal to do so. They also paid their temple tax. Somebody had to help them exchange their currency. The commercial implications of Passover were enormous, perhaps comparable to the Christmas season here in the United States today.

It's safe to say the merchants were making a fortune off the week of Passover. Perhaps, there was some price gouging going on, but this was not the focus of Jesus' anger, according to Saint John. Jesus was upset because all this buying and selling had intruded upon the sacred space for worship. Little by little things got out of hand – a merchant innocently sat up a table in a corner of the temple where worshipers might stop by and exchange a few coins. Another merchant followed suit, then another and another, until, before you know it, the temple had turned into an exchange house.

The temple had become a marketplace, a bazaar. It had lost its sacred character. It was well attended, and it was a beehive of activity, but there wasn't a lot of reverence and spirituality. It was being treated more like a shopping mall or bank building. It wasn't necessarily because the priests and the merchants were bad people; but because they'd lost sight of the fact it was, after all, holy ground on which they were standing. So, Jesus took out a whip and drove out the merchants and the sheep and the cattle and brought the activities of the temple to a screeching halt.

But the reality of God's temple is more than simply a building. Each one of us here is a temple that is purpose-made. At our baptisms, we became temples of the Holy Spirit. We are

walking, living temples in which God is made present and available to others. The temple of God today is found in the hearts and minds of those who follow Jesus Christ; wherever they may be.

We are the temple of the living God in the world today.

And this is where Jesus' cleansing of the temple hits home for us. Over time, if we're not careful, our lives can get cluttered up with the debris of sin. Ungodly habits and attitudes gradually creep in. And what's really tragic – even a bit frightening – is that we don't even realize that it's happening. Little by little, the taste for spiritual things diminishes. We lose our savor for holiness, our zest for knowing God; so that the kind of spiritual activities which used to give us pleasure now seem dull and uninteresting. To be concerned about avoiding sin no longer seems important or worthwhile. All this hinders our fellowship with each other. It hinders our ability to experience joy, and peace, and power in the Christian life.

It's not as if we go off the deep end and forsake our Christian calling altogether. It's just that we let little things slip into our everyday lives and take precedent over our commitment to Christ and His kingdom, until our relationship with Jesus Christ becomes secondary and nominal, at best. None of us is immune; none of us can afford to go merrily about our business, unconcerned with matters of sin and holiness.

So, the Church in her wisdom gives us Lent; which is a time of introspection, of looking within and taking note of the various ways we've strayed from the righteousness of God. It's a time for cleansing our spiritual houses and making our lives – mind, body, and soul – worthy places for the Spirit of God to dwell. Lent is given to us each year so that we might examine, change and clean up what's happening inside us. It's a time for us to put our spiritual houses back in order.

A big part of our spiritual spring cleaning is wrapped up in the word we hear a lot during Lent – repent. Repentance means not only being sorry for our sins but also making a change in our lives. And part of making a change in our lives is taking an inventory of what stays and what goes. Just like when we spring clean our physical houses, some things have to be discarded. When we look under our spiritual beds and in our spiritual nooks and crannies, we might find resentment that needs to be tossed out. We might find guilt or shame that needs to be sent to the curb. We might find pride or anger that needs to be set free. We might find relationships that need to be pruned. Letting go of these things may be very difficult to do. We’ve grown accustomed to having them in our lives.

But we have to get rid of them so we can be spiritually healthy once more, so we can make room for the things in our lives that truly matter – to make room for Jesus. And the good news is that we don’t have to do it alone. We have each other that we can look to for help. We have the sacraments to help cleanse us. But most importantly, we have Jesus. He will roll up his sleeves and help us do the cleansing. We only have to ask.

You see, our God is a God of second chances, and third chances, and so on. He’s always giving us another chance. It is only with Him, through Him, and in Him that we are able to live a life in all its fullness – to live our life as God intends it to be. God and sin can’t go together, just like oil and water; darkness and light; sadness and joy. So, this Lent as we journey towards Easter, let’s ask ourselves, “What needs to be driven out of our temple?” Our answer to this question is the substance of Lent.