

Cleaning House  
Preacher: Rev. Jill Olds  
Date: January 10, 2016

15:16

Let us pray. Holy One, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds together be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

Shortly after my first son was born, I asked my husband for a very unorthodox birthday present. Back then, we were both working full-time, with our infant in daycare only 15 hours a week, so needless to say, we were strapped for free time, and cleaning the house simply did not get done. I appreciate a relatively tidy home, so I asked for a cleaning service to come and scrub our house from top to bottom, a one-time overhaul of the dirt and crud that had accumulated in our neglected home. When a man and two women arrived, buckets and environmentally-friendly cleaning agents in hand, I was too embarrassed to even stay in the house. I took my son and did errands while they worked. My husband stayed behind, and he texted updates periodically. One thing was clear: they were working their tails off. When we got back, the house was spiffier than it ever had been before, and I confess that it has never looked that good since. They had cleaned spaces that I not only didn't know were dirty, but spaces that I never even knew existed—scrubbing our white mantle that had become darkened by smoke from our fireplace, dusting under radiators, cleaning the water marks from under my house plants. They were ruthless: any speck of grime and filth was gone, completely eradicated. They did a fabulous job, and while we never found ourselves able to afford to engage their services again, the way my soul felt in that clean space was an amazing gift. It was one that I certainly could not have given myself at the time. And yet, I confess that I felt both refreshed and guilty, in equal measure, at someone cleaning up the messes I had made, messes I couldn't clean up for myself.

Our text this morning is a recap of the ministry of John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Jesus' impending arrival on the scene. John's followers are understandably questioning whether he himself is the Messiah, but John sets the record straight: "John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'" I think that if we're honest with ourselves, John's vision of Jesus, coming with the Holy Spirit and fire and winnowing forks and unquenchable fires sounds a bit like a blaze-of-glory Hollywood movie. In today's world, many of us prefer pictures of Jesus that are friendlier, more sensitive to our multi-cultural, religiously diverse context: We like the image Jesus who welcomes children into his arms, for example. The Jesus who is our good shepherd. The Jesus who talks about love. The Jesus who embraces the outcast. These are the pictures of Jesus that tend to be... cleaner. Easier on the eyes. No embarrassment, no fuss. They're like the house that simply needs a light dusting, not the house that requires soul-crushing hours of backbreaking labor to eradicate months of accumulated filth. So what is John talking about here, with his unquenchable fire and winnowing fork language? What kind of Jesus is he describing? This involves a bit more digging.

Two pieces become important as we look at this seemingly harsh judgmental picture that John is painting of Jesus. The first piece is Biblical context. Immediately prior to this section, a large crowd begins to follow John, and John proceeds to call all of them—and this is important—he calls all of them "broods of vipers." Lovely, yes? Then, in the midst of the judgy-type language, he begins to tell them all what to do: they are to share their wealth and possessions with one another; he then begins talking to various subsets of his followers: to the soldiers, he says,

don't abuse your power; to the tax collectors, he says, essentially, don't rip off the people when you collect their taxes (a rather timely message for us today). Soldiers and tax collectors make up an odd sort of following for someone like John: it tells us that John was not just preaching to the Jews, but to the Romans as well. In reality, this is in keeping with the pictures of Jesus that we tend to gravitate towards today: this is like the Jesus who welcomes all and preaches to everyone. This is the message of Jesus who loves outcasts and cares about social justice and is a shepherd for everyone, preaching love...

But what of the "brood of vipers" stuff, and what about the rather judgmental, fiery language we had in our passage from this morning? How do these two things go together? To understand this, we look at its context biblically, but also historically. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." For those of you who left your PhD in farming back... on the farm, here's a bit of info about grain and chaff: a ripening seed of grain is surrounded by a dry, scaly protector that acts much like a husk around the grain. That husk is the chaff—it serves a great purpose in protecting the grain while it grows, but it is inedible, so once the grain has matured, it is removed and the chaff thrown away. This process was called winnowing, and in Biblical times, a farmer would have all of the grain—in this case, wheat—and chaff together on the threshing floor. He would use a fork or a fan and throw it all up into the wind. The wind would take all of the chaff, which was lighter and wisper in nature, and it would blow away, leaving the heavy wheat behind. The farmer would then collect the wheat and use it; the chaff would either be blown away completely, or the rest would be disposed of in a fire.

There is a judgment going on here, but it is important to remember that John was preaching to everyone: all of his followers are both broods of vipers AND capable of repentance. John was calling his followers, and us today as well, to look at Jesus' arrival and time of judgment not as a "some people are getting into heaven, and some people are going into the fires of hell" kind of thing. Rather, Jesus is coming with a winnowing fork: Jesus is coming to separate the wheat from the chaff inside all of us. Inside all of us, we have wheat (seeds of good things to come) and chaff (outer shells that once may have been useful, but now have outlived their purpose, and are now just mucking up our space, longer necessary or helpful). Jesus is coming to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, to be sure. But, to borrow from another section of Scripture, Jesus is coming not to condemn, but to save: he is coming to "judge" what is life-giving within us, and what is merely dirtying up the windows of our soul. He is coming to bring the fire to the chaff that resides within our spiritual houses. That chaff, that pesky chaff that mucks up our soul's home, that filthy chaff that sticks out from under our radiators and collects under our furniture—Jesus is coming with His winnowing fork, throwing open the windows, allowing fresh air to separate that chaff from the life-giving wheat of our spirits. This is the news that John gives to us: Jesus is coming to do some serious spring cleaning.

Now, how many of you actually like to clean? I confess, I do like to de-clutter, but I don't like to actually clean at all. It's seriously hard work. You can't be wishy-washy or sentimental when cleaning, or when de-cluttering—in order to create clean space, you need to be a bit ruthless. Some especially dirty spots require serious scrubbing. And sometimes, you can't do it on your own. When we hired our one-time cleaning helpers, I knew I couldn't physically do what they were going to do for me. I felt guilty about it—they saw the worst of what I had. But when it was done, I couldn't believe what that clean house did for my spirit. We all need help sometimes with this. In order to de-clutter specifically, sometimes you need someone to help you talk through what is wheat and what is chaff, what to keep and what to discard. How many of you have cleaned out a closet with a loved one? "But I love this shirt," you might say. "And when did you wear it last?" your loved one might reply. These conversations are helpful and necessary sometimes. Spiritually speaking, this is why we need the church. We need each other for help along our spiritual journeys, as we discern what to keep and maintain, and what to throw away. And of course, we need Jesus to come, to judge the worst of our chaff, and

help us clear out all those dirty places within ourselves that we aren't proud of, and even some places we didn't know existed.

In this new year, I imagine many of us will do some spring cleaning, some de-cluttering. In the midst of our hard work, and especially as Lent begins in just a few short weeks, may we also take some time to consider what kind of internal spring cleaning, what kind of separating wheat from chaff, what kind of repentance needs to happen within our very selves. Jesus is coming. He's coming with the Holy Spirit, and with fire. He's coming with cleaning agents the likes of which we don't have access to on our own. He's coming to help. Will we accept that we too need this kind of help, this kind of "judgment" so that we can be clean once again? In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.