

"Cleaning the House of the Lord"
2 Chronicles 29:12-19
25 October Anno Domini 1998
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho
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[Note: I think that this sermon is original with me, but I'm not entirely certain. MLM]

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Household of Faith,

How do you clean a church? Well, you might, as one of our sister congregations did, hire a janitor to clean it for you. They contracted an outsider to come in and clean their church, but it didn't really work all that well. The hired cleaner just didn't seem to have the same care and concern for their house of worship as one of their own members might have. So, it seems best to have one of your own responsible for cleaning the church. Certainly we are blessed here at Our Redeemer to have one of our own members who comes in to clean for 6-8 hours on one, and sometimes on days each week.

But that only takes care of the week-to-week things. What about the bigger projects? Well, that's when you get a bunch of people together on a particular day for a particular task. This happens a time or two every year around here. And I must say, there's something gratifying about seeing a group of congregation members working together to beautify the house of God -- to rake the leaves, clean out those gutters, and do some deeper cleaning.

This is kind-of what we see in this morning's sermon text. The Levites, who were responsible for maintaining the Temple, rose up together, banded together, to cleanse the Temple of the Lord. In doing so, they give us in the Church today of ...

... "Cleaning the House of the Lord."

2 Chronicles 29:12-19 -- Then the Levites arose, Mahath the son of Amasai, and Joel the son of Azariah, of the sons of the Kohathites; and of the sons of Merari, Kish the son of Abdi, and Azariah the son of Jehallelel; and of the Gershonites, Joah the son of Zimmah, and Eden the son of Joah; and of the sons of Elizaphan, Shimri and Jeuel; and of the sons of Asaph, Zechariah and Mattaniah; and of the sons of Heman, Jehuel and Shimei; and of the sons of Jeduthun, Shemaiah and Uzziel. They gathered their brethren, and sanctified themselves, and went in as the king had commanded, by the words of the LORD, to cleanse the house of the LORD. The priests went into the inner part of the house of the LORD to cleanse it, and they brought out all the uncleanness that they found in the temple of the LORD into the court of the house of the LORD; and the Levites took it and carried it out to the brook Kidron. They began to sanctify on the first day of the first month, and on the eighth day of the month they came to the vestibule of the LORD; then for eight days they sanctified the house of the LORD, and on the sixteenth day of the first month they finished. Then they went in to Hezekiah the king and said, "We have cleansed all the house of the LORD, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the table for the showbread and all its utensils. All the utensils which King Ahaz discarded in his reign when he was faithless, we have made ready and sanctified; and behold, they are before the altar of the LORD."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

The Levites, who were responsible for maintaining the Temple, rose up together, banded together, to cleanse the Temple of the Lord. But this was no mere maintenance job. This was no mundane janitorial task. You see, during the reign of their former king, King Ahaz, the Temple had fallen into disuse. Ahaz was not a believer, so he rejected the Temple worship and allowed the house of God to fall into disrepair. But more than that - he had removed the items for worship that God had established, and replaced them with his own idols and false gods. So you see, this was no mere spit-and-polish endeavor; this was a restoration effort. And more than just the building was involved; this encompassed the worship life of an entire nation.

So, how did they begin? They began by rising up together. This group from among the Levites banded together to undertake this task. This is emphasized in our text by naming each family and the representatives that took part. They recognized that each of them had a role to play in this task, and so they came together and worked together to accomplish their goal.

After coming together, the first thing they did was to cleanse themselves. A lot could be said on this, but let's suffice it to say that when undertaking a holy task, one must be found holy. In the days of our text there were particular rituals that were performed to cleanse oneself. And it may need to be mentioned that this was not just a physical cleansing; this was also a spiritual cleansing, because holiness involves more than a clean body. It involves a clean heart, mind, soul and spirit as well. These cleansing rituals were intended to make the whole person clean before God, which means they involved the forgiveness of sins.

No one can be clean before God without having their sins forgiven. We have still today just such cleansing rituals. But no, they are more than rituals, aren't they. Of course, I'm referring to Holy Baptism, the sacrament in which God cleanses us and washes away our sins, making us clean before Him. We also have Holy Communion and Holy Absolution. These too, are sacraments through which God works forgiveness of sins in us, thereby making us clean in His sight. If we, like the Levites, desire to serve the Lord in His house, we must be clean, we must be holy. And this cleansing, this holiness, comes through the forgiveness of sins in Baptism, Communion, and Absolution.

Once cleansed, these Levites began their work. But how did they know what to do? Our text says that they followed the king's command by the Word of God. You see, they had a new king, King Hezekiah. This king was a believer. And he had given these Levites the Lord's command to restore the Temple. And so they followed God's Word through the command of their king. And this is how we know what we are to do in God's house. We follow God's Word. God today works through pastors as He did through King Hezekiah, bringing His Word to them, teaching them how they might work together in His house.

The Levites in our text listened to the voice of their king and worked hard to restore God's house. They removed everything that was unclean. They took out all the idols and objects of worship that didn't belong there. They handed these things over to the priests, who took them down to the river and discarded them. This is kind-of a neat analogy of Baptism. When God cleanses us, we are brought to the waters of holy baptism, and our sins are left there.

But the Levites weren't content simply to remove all the unclean things. They also worked hard to

restore the proper articles of worship. Painstakingly, they cleansed the altar and the utensils used for worship at the altar. It's not enough, is it, to simply take away the bad. You have to replace it with what is good. Jesus tells the parable of the demon being exorcized from a man, saying that unless the Holy Spirit is put in place of the evil spirit, that demon will go out, find seven other demons, and come back and take up residence again in that man. If all we do is take out the bad, all we have is an empty house. We have to replace it with the good. This is what the Levites did.

In Luther's day, the church had fallen into very much the same state as the Temple had fallen in our text. The papacy, like King Ahaz, had removed the articles of faith that God had established, and replaced them with its own. Instead of salvation by grace through faith, the people were burdened with endless lists of good works which had to be accomplished to earn forgiveness. Instead of the eternal hope of heaven through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ, the people were given hope only in a purgatory from which their loved ones left behind had to pray for their release. Burden upon burden had come to replace the freedom we enjoy in the Gospel. Things looked as though the church, as God had established it, was gone forever.

But one day, God called upon Martin Luther to lead the church in cleansing itself of these false religious practices. Like King Hezekiah, he called the church together to rise up and remove the evil and replace it with God's original design. The Church, as it was, however, would not be cleansed. Though the true faith would be restored, it would have to be restored elsewhere. Thus, the church manifested itself once again, basing itself on the Word of God and not the tradition or desire or will or commandments of men. The original faith of the Bible once again replaced the false religion of men. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, as taught in Scripture alone, once again became the foundation stone of the church. The people followed the Word of God and restored His house.

But because human nature is always to replace God's design with a religion of our own, the church has to constantly be in the process of cleansing. That is true here at Our Redeemer. We need always to be looking to God's Word for direction as to how we are to live and work and worship in His house. Many opportunities arise, almost on a daily basis, to bring uncleanness into this house of God. So we must always be on the lookout for this, always ready to take direction from God's Word to cleanse His house.

For no human being will be justified in His sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, Whom God put forward as an expiation by His Blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that He Himself is righteous and that He justifies him who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.

The Reformation which began over 400 years ago must continue if God's house is to remain clean. God help us always to listen to the voice of His servant, to heed the command of His Word, that we may keep the faith pure, that through it He may continue to wash His people clean. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.