

“Spring House Cleaning”

Galatians 2:15-21

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

As a father and a step-father, I feel I can tell this story that is a bit edgy. It’s about the children who begged for a hamster and, after the usual fervent vows they alone would care for it, they got one. They named it Danny. Two months later (during which time Mom had sole care for about seven of the eight weeks) she located a new home for it. The children took the news of Danny’s imminent departure quite well, though one remarked “He’s been around a long time; we’ll miss him.”

Mom said, “Yes, but he’s too much work for one person. Since I’m that one person, I say he goes.” Another child offered, “Maybe if he wouldn’t eat so much and wouldn’t be so messy, we could keep him.”

But Mom was firm. “It’s time to take Danny to his new home now,” she insisted. “Go and get his cage.” With one, tearful, outraged voice the children shouted “Danny? We thought you said Daddy!”

Happy Father’s Day!

On a completely different note, you’ve got four more days. Then, spring ends and summer begins. With that, whatever clean up you’ve still got to do in the garage, attic or basement is no longer spring house cleaning. It’s summer house cleaning.

The neatfreaks among you cannot believe I am talking about this. Your spring cleaning was done on March 21 or shortly thereafter. God bless you. Because of you and people like you, we had lots of stuff to sell through Trash and Treasures at last week’s Fair on the Green. We got so much stuff we can’t take anymore. I love you. I wish I could be like you. But for those of us who live by a “file by pile” system, such advance planning is simply the waste of a great opportunity to procrastinate. Ask anyone who has seen not one but two messy desks in my office.

Let me pause here to reel in those who either have mentally wandered away as they contemplate the mess they left in home or office; or those who are sinking into despair thinking, *“I came to church for this today? I could have had my wife/husband/partner/mother/father—choose any that apply—remind me of this at home. Now I have to hear it from my pastor?”*

Well, no.

The kind of spring cleaning I want us to look at is of a spiritual nature, the inner person where our thoughts are thought, our intentions are organized, our prayers are voiced, and our actions take shape.

Paul talks about this kind of spiritual spring cleaning in today’s reading from Galatians. The challenge he addresses is at once simple and profound: how does one clean up life’s messes? Putting it more theologically: how are we saved?

Our impulse is to say we clean up our own messes and we curry God’s favor by behaving rightly. In other words, we do our own spring cleaning. The Letter to the Galatians is one account of this view. Galatia was a region in Asia Minor, today’s Turkey, that contained several churches (1:2b) that Paul helped to establish. His letter to them is unusual in that it omits the customary greetings: it fails to call the followers of Christ in Galatia “saints” and there is no opening paragraph of thanksgiving. Instead, by verse 6 of the first chapter Paul is scolding them: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ....”* Whew!

Why? The Galatians became persuaded that they were justified—put in right relationship—with God by works of religious law. To paraphrase the old Smith Barney ads in relation to making wealth, the Galatians were convinced that they “made salvation the old fashioned way: they *earned* it.”

If salvation—cleaning up the messes of our lives, living the spiritual life, setting off in new directions—is something we do on our own merit, by our own work, then we do not need God. Even when

such actions are God-directed. Some might say especially when they are God-directed. All that volunteerism, church-attending, tithing, singing, serving is not going to set our house in order. That's something only God through Jesus Christ can do.

That's what the cross is about. The cross is not about what we've done but about what God has done: how much God loves us and the extent to which God will go to redeem us. In the cross, our spiritual spring cleaning is done. Our house is in order. We are clean.

Why then be good? Because it's one thing to have a clean house but quite another to keep it clean. They do have self-cleaning ovens but they don't have self-cleaning houses, at least not yet. Self-cleaning people? Not yet.

Jesus Christ gives us a fresh spiritual start. Living it out, seeing ourselves as God sees us—clean, fresh, uncluttered, unfettered—is the task of the Christian. We leave the mud and the mess outside or, failing that, clean it up because God loves us and because we begin to glimpse ourselves as God sees us. We do not clean up the mess to earn the right to God's love. In fact, it is true that God loves us just the way we are.

Now at this point the sermon branches in two directions depending on where we find ourselves today. I'd venture that most of us have been on both of these branches at one time or another, so let's walk out on each branch and you and I can see if one or both speak to us.

The first branch is that we respond to this love of God by denying it: "I'm not worthy. I can't possibly be loved by God since I don't love myself or at least like myself and, besides, I mess up all the time."

Okay. In honor of Father's Day, here are some examples of people just like you:

The first was four years old before he could speak: Albert Einstein

The next did poorly in grade school and was considered

"unpromising:" Sir Isaac Newton

Of another a music teacher once said, "As a composer he is

hopeless:" Ludwig von Beethoven

This one was told by a teacher that he was too stupid to learn anything: Thomas Edison

These two were cut from their high school basketball teams:

Michael Jordan and, for a previous generation, Boston Celtics Hall of Famer Bob Cousy

The last was fired by a newspaper editor who told him he “lacked imagination and had no good ideas:” Walt Disney

“God don’t make junk” as it is said. See your life with God’s eyes, that you, too, were worth redeeming on the cross.

The other branch is that we do truly believe that God loves us but we are having trouble living out that divine image. That persistent sin, whatever it is, will not let us go. Max Lucado tells this story about his daughter in his book Just Like Jesus Devotional. When she was a toddler he used to take her to a park not far from their apartment. One day as she was playing in a sandbox, an ice-cream seller approached them. Max purchased his daughter a treat and, when he turned to give it to her, he saw her mouth was full of sand. Where he intended to put a delicacy, she had put dirt.

Did he love her with dirt in her mouth? Absolutely. Was she any less his daughter with dirt in her mouth? Of course not. Would he allow her to keep the dirt in her mouth? No way! He loved her right where she was, but he refused to leave her there. He carried her over to the water fountain and washed out her mouth. Why? Because he loved her.

Not so long ago I spoke with someone who wanted to change some things in their life. They knew the “right” thing to do but seemingly did not have the will to do it. I asked them, “What will you give up to get what you most want?” Behind this simple question is a great struggle: being clear and honest about what we most want, and acknowledging that we are finite creatures with limited time and resources. We must give up something to get what we most want.

More recently they began to practice some of the behaviors we discussed. To their surprise (and my relief!) they worked. New

behaviors built on knowing what they most wanted and what they were willing to give up. That clarity and small successes got them from destructive behavior to constructive behavior; from spiritual death to spiritual life.

It's just like house cleaning. We identify those things we most want to keep and what we will give up to clear away clutter and the distraction it causes. When we do that spiritually we are open to the help God offers—through family, friends, church family and professional helpers—to keep clean the spiritual home already cleansed by God's unconditional love.

In Jesus Christ, God gives us a new start, a clean house, a clean mouth and a clean slate. Spiritual spring house cleaning is the way we keep it that way. Don't wait four more days. Start today. Amen.