

Wesley United Methodist Church

December 10, 2017

“Cleaning House.”

Mark 1:1-12

A few years ago I read an article in the Thrifty Nickel which read: “We cater to clutter, Dependable house, apartment, or business cleaning.” And then there were a couple of phone numbers so you could contact the folks. There is nothing real earthshattering or funny about that ad what struck me is that ad could be the Church’s motto. Any church’s motto.

We cater to clutter. We don’t cater to the perfect. We don’t cater to those who have already made it. We don’t cater to those who don’t need help. We cater to those who need to be perfected. That’s our whole purpose in being. Of course, we have to do our part, too. We can’t just lay back and say, “Well, lay it on me, Lord.” No, a lot of times it takes lots of hard work to be perfected by God.

God takes us, the outcast, the imperfect, the unfaithful, the Tax collectors and sinners as the New Testament calls them, and through his divine love and grace, God perfects them. God transforms us and gives new meaning to our lives. God caters to the clutter in our lives and helps us clean up our acts. God helps us clean up our lives by pruning and grafting until we are like Christ. That’s why Christ came.

That was John the Baptist’s message as he stood there in the wilderness next to the Jordan River preaching repentance. He called for people to repent and let God change their lives. John the Baptist called them to repent as a way to clean up the spiritual clutter in their lives. Listen to what the Gospel of Mark says: Read Mark 1:1-12

Even Jesus, the Son of God, submitted to cleaning the clutter from his life. The message of the prophets before John was the same. Clean up your spiritual clutter in your life.

That’s what we’re called to do as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. It’s like getting ready for company we have to clean the house. During Advent, we have to clean the house of our souls. Let me tell you a story.

Tom and Linda had moved into their new house three months ago. They didn’t have it completely furnished yet, but there was enough furniture to entertain and this year Linda had invited both her family and Tom’s family for Christmas dinner. They were both so excited about celebrating their first Christmas in the new home with the entire family.

December first rolled around, and they started decorating. The very first thing to be set up was the Nativity Set. It was rich with family history. Her Great Grandfather had carved all the characters, the manger and the animals.

Her Great Grandfather had been a shepherd before coming to America and he carried his staff from the old country with him. When he discovered that sheep weren’t in much demand over here, he took up a different trade and set his shepherding aside. When he ventured out in his own business, he displayed the staff, so he would remember his humble beginnings.

When he retired as a small independent grocery store owner, he took up carving as a hobby. A devout Christian, one day he was inspired to carve a nativity set to give to his son. But the only wood around was the old shepherd’s staff. What could be better. So, he took it and began carving each of the figurines. Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus were the first to be carved; then the manger, the wise men and shepherds. It was amazing how much he got out of that one shepherd’s staff. There was even enough wood to carve four sheep, two camels, a cow and a donkey. Some of the larger animals had to be pieces and glued together, but they all came from his shepherd’s staff. It was truly a work of art which shone with his love for God.

After receiving it, Linda’s grandfather had displayed it proudly. But he always thought there was something missing. So, he in turn built and decorated a stable. It too, was a gorgeous work of art filled with some of the tiniest detail. You could count the straw on the floor of the stable.

When it was passed on to Linda’s father, he added his own work as well. He created a beautiful landscape base with rocks and hills and grass that brought it all together. It was the family heirloom which had been passed down from generation to generation through the oldest child.

The nativity scene was placed in the entry way of their new home, so everyone’s eye would be drawn to it first. Every day as they passed the nativity, it reminded them of the meaning of Christmas. But like so many things that we have, after a few days it just became a fixture to Tom and Linda. It’s not that they didn’t notice it, they did but there were so many other things to do to get ready for their first Christmas gathering in their new home. The hustle and bustle just seemed to never end. Decorating, cooking, cleaning, buying and wrapping the perfect gifts for everyone so that this could be the most perfect Christmas ever.

It seemed like there was always one more thing to do, one more thing to clean up, put away or put together. And after a while, Tom and Linda were so busy that they didn’t feel any of the joy of the season. The nativity just sat there,

being ignored. Oh, when someone came into their home and saw it, they remarked on its beauty, but it was soon forgotten in all the rush of Christmas preparations and parties.

Then came Christmas Day. It was a glorious success. The house was spotless. The tree was beautiful. All the presents perfectly matched the person for whom they were purchased. The meal was perfect. Everything went so smooth that Tom and Linda could hardly believe it. At one point Linda saw her father and her grandfather looking and was compelled to go stand with them, but then someone asked for something and as the good hostess she went to oblige and forgot all about the nativity, again.

When the day was done and everyone had left, Tom and Linda were in the kitchen cleaning up and talking how perfect the day went. Tom thought Linda would be happy, but instead she seemed to be a little down. When asked, Linda said, "Oh, I don't know. Everything went great. Everything was perfect. And yet, somehow, I feel like something is missing. I just don't feel Christmas this year. Here it is Christmas Day and it doesn't feel like Christmas." Trying to console her, Tom said, "Well, we were pretty busy." "Yeah, I guess," Linda said with a sigh. Then she headed to the living room to pick up some glasses and, for some reason, decided to walk by the nativity. And when she did, she let out a loud gasp and called Tom. When he came running, Linda said, "The baby Jesus is gone." So the two of them started looking but they couldn't find the figurine anywhere. Could someone have taken it home? No, everyone knew the story and the history of the nativity and wouldn't think of doing anything like that. They began to search all the more diligently. Still, no baby Jesus.

Then at almost the same time, both saw the same thing. It was a tiny carved foot sticking out from under the hutch in the dining room. They both rushed over at the same time. They had no idea how it had gotten there but they were both extremely relieved. Linda knelt down picked up the baby Jesus and with a sigh of relief said, "There you are."

And at that moment, she and Tom realized what was missing from their Christmas, the Christ Child. They had gotten so caught up in all the hoopla and hype of Christmas preparations that they had forgotten the true meaning and focus of the season. They'd been so busy shopping and decorating and wrapping and getting ready for Christmas day that they hadn't even gone to church. They had even missed Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion Service. They never did that. They had attended the Christmas Eve service since they started going together as Seniors in High School.

Taking the small carved Christ Child and placing it back in the manger, Tom and Linda both knelt in front of the nativity. Holding hands, they asked God for forgiveness for being so busy. And though it was a little late in coming, the spirit of Christmas flooded their hearts with the joy they had been missing. They gave thanks to God for helping them find their way back. And they rededicated themselves to Christ who came not for the gifts. Not for the trapping of Christmas, but TO BE the greatest gift of all.

Like Tom and Linda, in order for us to experience the true joy of Christmas and all that the season holds, we have to make sure the Christ Child isn't missing from our Christmas. We have to make sure we don't get so distracted by the celebration that we forget WHY and WHO we are celebrating. We have to clean out the spiritual clutter in our lives. But the thing is, we can't do it on our own. We're offered a clean heart and a clean soul through Christ. So, while you're Cleaning House for X-mas, don't forget to Clean the House of your Soul. That is why he came, you know. Don't miss it.