

Making Room

Isaiah 56:1-8 Mark 11:1-11, 15-19

Mark 11:1-11

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, (quoting from Psalm 118)

'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Jesus was scoping things out; doing a little reconnaissance work at night. Jesus and his disciples spent the night in the town of Bethany each night that week and came back into the city each morning. So after scoping things out in the temple the first night, here is what happens the next day...

Mark 11:15-19

Then they came to Jerusalem. And Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; (note: Jesus overturned tables and seats; he did not touch any person, nor did he upset the animals. It shows a respect for the living beings—he did not harm any animal, or person). He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?'

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

This is the word of the Lord.

On Palm Sunday every year we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, so that he could celebrate the Passover with his disciples along with the thousands of other pilgrims who made the journey for Passover. And the very first thing Jesus does upon entering the city, according to all of the gospel writers, is head straight to the temple, because he is going to teach there every day. And what he sees there clearly upsets him... and so he causes quite a stir by upsetting the order of things.

This week is a tense week for Jesus and his followers: he's teaching in the temple every day; he's arguing with the scribes and Pharisees every day; people are plotting to kill him every day. That would make for a tense week!

Remember, this is a very crowded city Jesus enters, because of all of the pilgrims who have made the trip from hither and yon to celebrate Passover. Mainly Jewish pilgrims, but non-Jewish worshipers as well—Gentiles, or “God-fearers” as they were called. Sometimes they are called foreigners, sometimes they are called outsiders. These are ethnically non-Israeli people who chose Judaism as their religion to practice. And the Jewish law made provision for non-Jewish worshipers, and that provision ensured welcome and participation—if not full participation at least partial participation in the worship and rituals.

So here is this crowded city, and all eyes and ears are fixed upon Jesus. He caused quite a stir in Jerusalem at his birth—now, his life has come full circle and he’s causing quite a stir there as he nears death.

This account of Jesus “cleansing” the temple, as it has been called, is consistently misunderstood and misinterpreted. Many preachers and teachers have used this text to condemn any fundraising efforts at church, thinking that these efforts are like the money changers at the temple. Which is a misunderstanding of the reasons Jesus was upset, and why he did what he did.

Because... Church fundraisers raise money for mission and ministry—and when it’s done right, all of the proceeds go toward *mission and ministry* (which, btw, includes keeping the facility in good working order! A good working facility

facilitates mission and ministry). However, this is *not* what was happening at the temple in Jerusalem. These merchants in the temple were *not* funding mission and ministry or exercising good stewardship of facility in the temple. They were *lining their own pockets, and the pockets of the priests and other religious leaders who employed them.*

The merchants and money changers in Jerusalem were trying to capitalize on the huge crowds gathering there. Again, imagine all of the people who have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, who needed to procure the necessary items for their offerings and sacrifices. They couldn't carry sacrificial doves with them for miles and miles, or drag along sheep and goats and other animals with them, or carry wheat or grain or whatever else they needed for their ritual offerings. So, they had to bring money, and the money they carried with them was the coin of the realm—Roman currency. But the temple had its own currency because the Romans allowed the Jewish temple leadership to conduct their affairs using their own currency.

What this meant was, that before those worshippers who had made pilgrimage could buy any of the items they needed for their sacrifices and offerings, they had to exchange *Roman* currency for *temple* currency. And the

temple leaders and priests made sure that the exchange rate benefitted *them* with exorbitant exchange rates.

That's what the "money changers" were doing. And then, on top of that, the merchants who were selling all of the necessary sacrificial goods were controlled by the priests, and were selling them at a huge markup, so that the priests and the temple leaders got a kickback from their profits. And just in case someone got the wise idea of setting up a competing market elsewhere and undercutting the temple sellers, the priests had that covered too. Because before an animal or a measure of grain or oil and whatnot, could be offered or sacrificed, it had to pass a temple inspection. So the priests who were getting a kickback would simply reject any animal or produce that didn't come from their licensed merchants. The whole system was filled with greed and corruption because money changers and merchants had a corner on the market, so they could charge whatever they wanted, and thus make a hefty personal profit.

It had become a money-making opportunity that capitalized on the needs of the pilgrims, most of whom were simple folks from the surrounding countryside who didn't have a lot of disposable income.

So, if we ask, "What made Jesus so mad that he upset the furniture?", this is one cause: the greed and corruption on the part of the religious leaders. But

there is another cause, and reason for Jesus' anger here. And it has to do with *where* this money changing and selling of items takes place in the temple area.

The place where the merchandising happens is significant, and it's the reason why Jesus quotes the line from the prophet Isaiah, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.*"

Here is a brief and over-simplified description of the temple in Jerusalem at that time, to help us understand the physical context in which this event occurs. We have the religious context (Passover), the social context (the diverse crowd that's in town), and now the physical context will complete the picture...

The architecture of the temple reflected the religious structure and hierarchy of the Jewish religion, and the social hierarchy of that time: think of concentric squares, or rectangles. **Image on screen**; a bird's eye view of the layout of the temple—take the roof off, and from above here is how it's laid out.

Starting with the very center, you had the holy of holies, into which only one specific priest was allowed to go only once a year on the day of atonement. It's where the ark of the covenant was kept, and the most sacred and historical items of Judaism of that time.

Then outside of that (going down) was the priests' court—only the ordained clergy were allowed to go there.

Then there was the men's court—also called the court of the Israelites.

Then the women's court. (notice that all of the courts had a separate entrance, so no one was rubbing shoulders with each other)

Then, beyond the women's court and outside of the main gate, the main entrance, was a smallish place called the court of the Gentiles, where non-Jewish worshipers ("God fearers" or "foreigners" or "outsiders") could come to worship.

Again, picture this—many people, from Africa and Asia, or ethnically Greek folks, for example, would travel to Jerusalem for worship for the major festivals. These worshipers were relegated to the far-off outer court of the temple, the "court of the Gentiles," and from there they would try to listen to what was going on, and participate as best as they could. Through walls and gates! (image off)

And it was in that smallish outer court, the court of the Gentiles *where the money changers were exchanging currency, and where temple merchants were selling the needed items for peoples' worship*. Money changers and merchants had set up shop in the court of the Gentiles.

And by setting up shop in the court of the Gentiles, it meant that non-Jewish pilgrims & worshipers were getting squeezed out of their space, displaced and dislocated, without a place to observe the rituals and worship of Passover.

The court of the temple reserved for foreigners and God-fearers had become a pop-up shopping mall. Pens of sheep, goats, doves, and other sacrificial animals, and containers of grain and wheat and oil and all that, were everywhere in that outer court. Moneychangers operated their business from their tables there. And large crowds of people who were required to change Roman currency for temple currency, and then required to purchase the approved animals and goods for their offerings, were gathered there. Imagine how crowded that would be; and how noisy. And so, non-Jewish worshipers literally didn't have a place to stand. They were functionally excluded.

And this is the second, and perhaps deeper reason for Jesus' anger and his actions: the merchants were preventing the foreigners from worshiping. Because all of the merchandising and money changing is taking place in the space that was reserved for them.

It's so incredibly ironic that they are selling items for worship, but they are preventing worship from happening—for some people, at least. And, the people they are excluding from worship are the very people who God, in Christ, came to serve and draw near to himself, as you heard in the Isaiah reading—which is but one representative text of where this is stated over and over again. It's amazing

how some people will willingly turn a blind eye to what their sacred scriptures clearly say, for the sake of personal gain, or power.

And so, Jesus lets them have it, and he upsets the order of things. And by the way, in the Isaiah text that Glenna read, God clearly tells *foreigners* that they should never say to themselves that they don't belong, and shouldn't let others tell them that either; God also includes *eunuchs*—men who, for a variety of reasons, were unable to procreate. Jesus reiterates this in Matthew 19:11-12 and says that eunuchs were either born that way, were forced to be that way, or they willingly devoted themselves to celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Eunuchs were traditionally excluded from the worship and rituals of Judaism, but even God, through Isaiah, says that they are to be included. As did Jesus, later on.

Jesus' ministry, all along, has been to welcome and include the outsider—persons from any and all backgrounds, life situations, women, children, Jewish folks and non-Jewish folks. He excluded no one from his ministry.

But now, in the temple, Jesus sees worshipers who are trying to find their place at the temple for worship being prevented from having access.

And so Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, in the reading you just heard, as a way of reminding the Jewish religious leaders of what God had said to the people when the temple was built: namely, that foreigners and outsiders are

wholeheartedly welcome, they are part of God's family and God's mission, and therefore, "My house shall be called a house of prayer... *for all nations.*" Literally, for all ethnicities; all people groups. But, Jesus says to them—now quoting from the prophet Jeremiah—you have made it into a house of thieves. A den of robbers. You have become people who are stealing from others with greedy and corrupt practices.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, he must have had the temple structure in mind when he penned these words: "*remember that once you Gentiles by birth were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel... but now in Christ you who were once far off (out there in the outer court) have been brought near by the sacrifice of Jesus. For he is our peace, and in his flesh he has made both groups into one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and... members of the household of God... in him (Jesus) the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you are built together spiritually, into a dwelling place for God.*"

Everyone is included, Paul is saying. Everyone is part of the household. Everyone, together, is a dwelling place for God's Spirit. The problem with the

merchants and the money changers in the temple is that they had built walls and taken up space, instead of tearing down walls and creating space.

So Jesus' anger that day makes sense. He came to create access to God for those who had no access before. He saw the pride and prejudice, and the greed. And so, he turns over the tables and chairs of the merchants and money changers to make room for worship.

Realistically, though, this was a temporary disruption. Because, greed is fierce and relentless, so the merchants and money changers would have set up shop again and continued their practices. But the importance of Jesus' action on that first day in Jerusalem is that it was symbolic. It's like an enacted parable, in which he needed to do something startling to get his point across.

This is symbolic—symbolic of Jesus upsetting the *religion* of his day. Which he had a habit of doing *for three years*, actually, but especially this day, in the temple. This event had a ripple effect into their religious and social systems, which is why they begin, at that moment, to seriously and earnestly plot to kill him. Jesus touched a nerve—and it's interesting that hitting their pocketbooks is what solicited the fiercest pushback.

Jesus upsets the religion of his day, and therefore the significance of it, from then on, is that it upsets any human-made religious structure or practice that functionally excludes others, to the benefit of a few.

And each Holy Week, when we read and reflect on this event, it's an opportunity for any and every church to reflect on what parts of their practices—of their religion so to speak—might need to be rearranged, maybe even upset a bit, so that all are truly welcomed and have access to worship and learning about God and experiencing God through common prayer and ritual.

It takes more than putting an “all are welcome” sign out in front. It takes open hearts, and open arms, which come from an understanding of God's open heart and open arms to anyone and everyone who desires to learn and grow and worship God.

And I'm proud to say that we here at Maplewood have done a good job of becoming the warm and welcoming community that we desire to be. To my observation we're on a good trajectory with regard to this. There is always room to improve, and improvise, and try new things, and let go of things that aren't working any more, or only work for a few people. Again, it simply requires us being open and willing.

Going back to Jesus' evening trip to the temple to look around inside... As I reflected on this, it caused me to reflect on how I, and each of us, perhaps, as one final part of our Lenten reflection, can take some time and let Jesus come in and "look around" in the temple of our hearts, like he did that evening as soon as he entered Jerusalem. And perhaps we can ask him what he sees, and if there are ways that our hearts and lives can open up even more to make room, and welcome others.

All Are Welcome.