

Making Room

Isaiah 56:1-8 Mark 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,
'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.

He was scoping things out; doing a little reconnaissance work... So here is what happens the next day (they spent the night in the town of Bethany each night that week. 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 he 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; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 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, to 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 upsets him... and so he causes quite a stir by rearranging the furniture a bit.

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, or outsiders; these are non-Jewish people who chose Judaism as their religion to practice. And, on top of Jewish and non-Jewish worshipers who came to Jerusalem, there were all those who just loved a party who showed up.

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 as he nears death.

This account of Jesus “cleansing” the temple, as it has been called, is consistently misunderstood and misinterpreted. This account has been misinterpreted over the years. I remember, for example, a friend of mine who was a junior high and high school youth director at a church who held a fundraising effort for a youth mission trip in the church social hall. And, during the fundraiser, the senior pastor came and overturned the tables. Thought he was Jesus, I guess. The pastor clearly would have known about the fundraiser beforehand and could’ve put the kibosh on it if he didn’t want it to happen, but I guess he wanted to make a scene to teach everyone a lesson. But his actions represent a faulty understanding of what made Jesus angry that day, and why he overturned the tables at the temple.

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, again, is a misunderstanding of the reasons Jesus was upset, and why he did what he did.

Let me explain. 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, that is not what was happening at the temple in Jerusalem. These merchants in the temple were not funding mission and ministry or exercising good management 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 worship 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 money.

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 undercut the temple sellers, the priests had that covered too. Because before an animal or a measure of grain, 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.

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 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 (who'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.

Starting with the very center, you had the holy of holies, into which only one 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 (imagine the closet at front of sanctuary this way. Don't go in there! Unless you're the chosen one, once a year).

Then outside of that was the priests court—only the ordained clergy were allowed to go there (think pulpit and communion table & baptismal font area, roped off).

Then there was the men's court (no women or children allowed; think main sanctuary).

Then the women's court (narthex).

Then, adjacent to, or beyond the women's court was a place called the court of the Gentiles, where non-Jewish worshipers ("God fearers" or "foreigners/outsideers") could come to worship (social hall).

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.

And it was in that 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.

Which meant, non-Jewish pilgrims/worshippers were getting squeezed out of their space, displaced and dislocated, without a place to observe the rituals and worship of Passover.

The outer court of the temple had become a veritable 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 the outer court. Moneychangers operated 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 so, non-Jewish worshippers literally didn't have a place to stand. They were functionally excluded.

And this is the second, and deeper reason for Jesus' anger and his actions: the merchants were preventing the outsiders/foreigners from worshipping. Because all of the merchandising and money changing is taking place in the court of the Gentiles.

It's 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 minister to and draw near to himself, as you heard in the Isaiah reading (as one representative text of where this is stated over and over again).

And so, Jesus lets them have it, and he upsets the order of things. We Presbyterians have a reputation of doing things decently and in order, but Jesus' actions were not decent or in order that day! I'm not sure they were decent and in order during any of his three years of ministry, but especially here in Jerusalem!

Jesus' ministry, all along, has been to welcome and accept 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, 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 corrupt practices.

Check out Ephesians chapter 2—the apostle Paul must have had the temple structure in mind when he penned these words: (starting at 2:11): *“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 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.”*

Isn't that cool?!? 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 he drives out 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 that day 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*, 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 if necessary, so that all are truly welcomed and have access to worship and learning about God.

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.

Now, while I believe that every church needs to take an honest look at themselves from time to time to assess their understanding of what welcoming people looks like for them and how they’re doing at it in practice... and while I think every church can probably do better at this, I am proud to say that we here at MPC have done a good job of becoming the warm and welcoming community that we desire to be. If I’m wrong about that I want to know! But to my observation we’re on a good trajectory with regard to this.

I’d like to call attention, just for a moment, to our vision statement. It’s in the bulletin every week, which is great, but also means it’s easy to miss because it’s always there. It says:

As a community of faith empowered by the living God, we are committed to

- * declaring and demonstrating the power of the gospel through the love of Jesus;
- * connecting people to Jesus and to one another.

We will fulfill this mission by being

- * open and welcoming to all;
- * proactive in serving the needs of our Edmonds & Lynnwood community, working in partnership with other faith communities;
- * aware and informed about larger, worldwide needs and trends.

The visioning task force, who you heard from a couple weeks ago, will continue to look at this to see if this continues to be our mission, and if so, how can we continue to fulfill it and even improve on our efforts to fulfill it. This morning, it's the "being open and welcoming to all" that I'm calling our attention to, as Jesus would want his people to become. So, let's keep up the good work!

As I was reflecting on that passage from Ephesians about Jesus tearing down walls, and making peace, and how God's people are being built together, and how it's really the *people* who are the house of God and not just a physical structure... it caused me to reflect on how can each of us, perhaps as one final part of our Lenten reflection, can take some time and let Jesus come 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 welcome others.

Let Us Build a House of Worship