

Sick of Religion?: Looking for a Fight

Mark 11:15-19

While we were in North Carolina recently, Cyndi and I visited our daughter Rachel in Montreat. We were out exploring one morning and were sitting at an intersection when a colossal pickup truck... with wheels taller than our car... began to turn onto our street from the right. I was so far below him all I could see was the top of his baseball cap. So...I haven't a clue what he was paying attention to. But clearly it wasn't our car. Because, as he turned, he cut the corner and was headed straight for us.

I laid on the horn. It sounded like the buzzer on our dryer. (Bzzzz). He kept coming. I pushed so hard trying to make the horn honk louder, I literally pulled a muscle in my arm. I'm not kidding...I injured myself pushing that horn through the dashboard. It made no difference. He zoomed closer and closer until I knew he was going to drive right over the top of us. And in that moment, I had one thought flash through my mind. "I should NOT have declined that rental insurance!" Actually, I had other thoughts but they are not worthy of Holy Week!

Finally...he saw me and slammed on the brakes. The monster truck shook...the back end raised up a bit, plopped down...and came to a stop...inches from the front of our car. I could see the Carolinian bugs squashed on his grill. We just sat there for a moment. My arm was throbbing. Then the guy backed up, pulled around me...and as he passed, rolled down his window and said, "Sorry..." That was nice of him...but a little understated considering the fact that he nearly rolled right over the top of us.

This evening/morning Jesus is going to roll right over the top of some very surprised merchants. If your image of Jesus is a little sissified, this is going to be a shock to your system! Because he's going to bring down the hammer. It's Palm Sunday; he's ridden down from the Mt. of Olives on a donkey. At the bottom, he dismounts and walks up the other side of the Kidron Valley where Mark continues the story. Now, you are going to need to remember all the parts for it to make sense. So...are you ready? Mk 3: 11-19.

"... [Jesus] 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.

When you travel with me to Israel, I will take you to the top of the Mt. of Olives and show you the most spectacular site in Jerusalem. But it was even more spectacular when Jesus stood there. This is what the Temple Mount looked like before the Romans destroyed it in 70 A.D. That gate is the one Jesus would have walked through to access the courtyard in our story. Mark tells us that when Jesus went inside the temple grounds, he did this: Demonstrate "He looked around at everything." We aren't told what he saw...or how he felt. But we find out shortly. Bookmark this moment; we're come back to it. Let's keep going.

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

When Jesus was in Jerusalem, he stayed with his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany, two miles away. On the Monday after Palm Sunday, he is walking back toward Jerusalem and on the way, performs a miracle that is unique. This is Jesus' ONLY miracle of destruction. He is hungry and spots a fig tree, but when he discovers it is barren, he curses it. Now, since we are told that it was NOT the season for figs... it might seem odd... even a little cruel...for Jesus to curse a tree when it was out of season. It would be like us getting mad at a barren apple tree in January.

But fig trees are different. The first things they sprout are little green knobs called *paggim*. These baby figs are edible. And after *paggim* appear, the leaves sprout. So...if you spot a fig tree with leaves, you could expect to find *paggim* to nibble on. In other words, the leaves on a fig tree should be a sign of fruit. But when Jesus draws near the tree, he finds it barren. It shows signs of fruit...but has no fruit. So...Jesus curses it. In essence, he says, "You have all the signs...all the possibility of bearing fruit. But you are fruitless. So...for the rest of your life...you will remain so."

Now...you might think Jesus needed an extra cup of coffee that morning; that he was a little grouchy. But if you understand that the fig tree was an Old Testament symbol of the Jewish people, the rest of the story comes together. So let's continue.

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, "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 the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

Let's take another look at our model. The temple is that tall building in the middle. The temple courtyard was surrounded on all sides by a porch held up by columns. It was called Solomon's portico and was the only shade in the outer courtyard...which made it the perfect place to set up shop. And they did. Merchants set up tables in between the pillars in every nook and cranny.

It was like a Jerusalem strip mall. And what were they selling? First, there were money-changers. Every Jew had to pay a temple tax. AND...because Jews considered ANY carvings of the human form to be a violation of the Second Commandments...if you showed up with money that had the image of a Roman emperor you could not pay your temple tax with that coin. But the money-changers would be happy to exchange your pagan coin for a proper temple coin. And if you wanted to make a sacrifice at the temple...you needed something to kill. So other merchants sold pigeons and lambs and goats so that pilgrims could perform their rituals.

Now...on one hand, these merchants were a great convenience to pilgrims. If you only had foreign coins, you needed a money-changer. If you arrived empty-handed, you needed someplace to buy the animals for sacrifice. In other words, these merchants provided a great service to the pilgrims.

Except for one thing. What? They were RIPPING THEM OFF! They charged outrageous exchange rates on the coins...and exorbitant prices for the sacrificial animals. It was like buying something to eat inside an airport. Like this bag of jerky. I paid \$8 for this in the Raleigh airport. It contained three pieces of jerky, 5 crumbs and a chunk of gristle. But what are you going to do? Go back through security to find a 7-11? You're trapped. And they know it. And so did the merchants...AND the Chief Priests who got a kickback on every sale.

THAT is what Jesus saw when he walked into the temple the night before and looked around. He saw a magnificent structure...with a holy purpose...and all the trappings of faith...but it had been turned into a

flea market. And suddenly... we understand the fig tree; a tree that LOOKS like it should bear fruit...but is barren and worthless. That fig tree is a parable of what Jesus saw in that temple! It had all the leaves...all the trappings of religion. But was fruitless. It was a money-making religious scam and Jesus drove his big pickup truck right over the top of it.

This is an amazing glimpse of a very intimidating Messiah. Walking right into the middle of enemy territory, disrupting commerce, flipping tables, chasing them out. There were temple guards on duty and even THEY didn't dare interfere with this one ferocious guy on a crusade. This is Jesus as the Old Testament prophet; Jesus as the righteous judge; Jesus as the conquering warrior...all wrapped up into one! And this is a glimpse of Jesus who will come back next time. So much for gentle Jesus, meek and mild!

This is the angriest we ever see him. So what fired him up? Well...turning the temple into a high-priced shopping mall that gouged worshippers was certainly one issue. When we read about pastors buying \$200,000 Lamborghinis for their wives or \$54 million jets, we might understand how Jesus felt. When he says, "You have made this house of prayer into a den of robbers..." -- he wasn't exactly subtle about his feelings. Jesus gets riled up when churches rip their people off.

But there is something deeper here. You may not realize it, but many pilgrims were not Jews. They had not yet converted. But they were attracted to Judaism. Their pagan religions had countless gods. Their "worship services" included prostitution and drunkenness. But Israel's god was holy; he demanded righteousness...and this was attractive to them. So it wasn't just Jews who came to worship at the temple; Gentiles who longed for something more spiritually... they came by the thousands.

The Jews had a name for them: "God-Fearers." And they were supposed to be welcome there! Jesus quotes Isaiah who wrote that the temple was intended to be a house of prayer for ALL Nations...not just Jews! The large outer courtyard was even called the Court of the Gentiles; a place of prayer for God-Fearers. And by the way, it was the ONLY place Gentiles could go. Do you see that little fence surrounding the inner courtyards? There were signs on that fence that warned Gentiles they would be put to death if they crossed that line. I've seen that very sign in a museum in Istanbul. It is the only relic that remains of the Jewish temple.

So, Gentiles were welcome...but they had to stay in a certain area. And guess where the merchants set up shop? In the Court of the Gentiles. In other words, they were squeezing the Gentiles out. And they were making it so expensive that many could not afford to worship. They were making it harder for God-Fearers to become God-Followers. Imagine you're a pagan who has travelled from a distant land. You've heard about Yahweh. You've heard that you are welcome in his temple; that there is even a place especially for you. But after a long journey, you find yourself being fleeced at every turn. And being squeezed out and pushed to the side. You came to pray... but can't even hear yourself over the shouts of the merchants. How heartsick would you be...after a long pilgrimage...to discover that it was a lie; that there really WASN'T a place for you after all?

But then...as you are fuming off to the side, you see something awesome. A terrifying man... fire in his eyes...flipping over tables...tearing the place a part. Shouting in anger. You see money-changers fleeing his wrath...he won't even let them carry their money bags. And with your minimal Hebrew...you realize...this guy is fighting for you. He's on your side! He's making a place for you in God's house!

Jesus was furious because those who were supposed to welcome outsiders had made it almost impossible for them to come inside. Judaism had become a club of the religious elite that created barriers to keep people AWAY from god. And it didn't stop in the Court of the Gentiles. The farther in you went, the more exclusive it became. Inside the Court of the Gentiles was the Court of the Women. They couldn't go any farther than that. The next court was as far as the men could go. Then a room where only priests could go.

And then...one more room. The Holy of Holies. Blocked by a huge curtain four inches thick. This was No Man's Land where God's glory was said to dwell. Only the high priest could go beyond that curtain...and only once a year. It is said that they tied a chain around his waist so that if he was struck dead by the holiness of God, they would at least be able to drag his body back out. But do you remember what happened the moment Jesus breathed his last on the cross? That curtain of separation was torn from top to bottom like tissue paper.

Holy Week was a week of disruption in which Jesus tore down every barrier that keeps people away from his Father: barriers of race... of gender... of ordination... of sin...all struck down! What Jesus did in the Court of the Gentiles on Monday...what Jesus did in the Holy of Holies on Good Friday...was make a way for all who long to come near to God.

If you consider yourself a spiritual outsider, the good news is...every barrier that might keep you from God...fearsome, awesome, invincible Jesus has knocked down and torn apart. The God of the Universe invites you to come to him...and nothing need stop you. You have a friend in Jesus who fought and died to make a way for you!

But what about us insiders? What does this story say to us? As the Chief Priest of this church, (the ultimate insider,) I can't help but ask, if Jesus walked into THIS temple... and looked around at everything... what would he see? What would he do? How would he feel? Would he find fruit? Would he see Christians excited about worshipping their god...and excited to welcome seekers? Eager to make a place in our parking lot and in our pew and at our table and in our circle for those who do not yet know how hard Jesus fought for them? A place where God-Fearers become God-Followers? I believe that is what he would see. I PRAY that is what he sees when he looks at us! Don't you?

We have a big, beautiful temple God has given us. Next week thousands of pilgrims will come visiting, curious about what goes on in here. I pray they will discover a place of prayer for all people, a place filled with the Holy Spirit of the resurrected and awesome Jesus Christ.