

Mark 11:12-19

Jeremiah 7:1-11

Keeping Time: Jesus' Last Week

(based on a book by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*)

Sermon Title: Monday

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\*Title slide\*

A few weeks ago, we celebrated one year of ministry together. In the first sermon I preached, after John and I moved here, I said that in my sermons I planned to preach about the Bible and why what's in it matters to our lives today. I told you that I would use what's happening in the world in order to talk about what it means to follow Jesus. In keeping with that promise, last week, in the first sermon of our Lenten sermon series, I compared the world in which Jesus, according to the author of Mark, lived, to the world in which we live. I spent a good deal of time talking about the domination system that was in place then and asked you to consider the features of that system and whether or not you see them in the United States now.

I asked, in this country, do we see political oppression? Do we see economic exploitation? Do we see religious legitimization? My answer is yes. I ask you again this week to continue to wrestle with how our text intersects with what's happening in our nation, in our own community right now. Our story last week ended, following Jesus' preplanned, protest-like entry into Jerusalem, with Jesus going into the temple, taking a look around and retreating to Bethany for the night. The next day, Jesus came back into Jerusalem and made another visit to the temple.

\*On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. <sup>13</sup> Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. <sup>14</sup> He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

<sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. <sup>17</sup> 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."

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples<sup>[a]</sup> went out of the city.

The author of Mark writes that Jesus, having retreated to Bethany for the night, came into the city in the morning and was understandably hungry. He saw a fig tree, which, had it been the right time of the year, would have been full of figs. When he found it fig-less, he pronounced a curse on it and moved on.

\*Imagine an apple tree in February. We wouldn't see that tree in the distance, walk over to it and expect there to be apples on it, right? We could look at the tree and consider it a picture of the barrenness of winter or a symbol of hope for things to come, or even a symbol of unrealized potential. I'm sure there are other metaphors we could come up with. The fig tree part of Mark's story is also a symbol; a symbol of what was to come for Jerusalem's temple. It's not a historical detail, but literary foreshadowing.

When Mark wrote this gospel, decades after Jesus' death, Jerusalem was in turmoil. In fact, depending on when the gospel was written, the temple might already have been destroyed. And it's important that we remember that as we read it. While Mark's story is about Jesus' last week in Jerusalem, it was written in a very different time, and wasn't written just to tell the story of Jesus' last days, but to interpret for readers, the author's belief in Jesus as messiah.

After cursing the fig tree, Jesus and the disciples entered the temple. I want to pause here for moment and tell you a little about my faith journey that connects with this story. I have shared with you from time to time my disappointment with churches who do not extend hospitality to others. Specifically, I have shared with you that, as a teenager, I felt very much like I didn't belong and wasn't welcome in church. Well, here's another thing. I spent a lot of time, when I was little, with my grandparents in their little Presbyterian church. There, in Sunday School, I heard a lot of stories about how wonderfully kind, gentle, meek, and mild Jesus was; how "Jesus loved the little children."

\*The classroom walls had pictures like this of Jesus on them. Honestly, though, there was nothing in any of the stories I remember hearing about him that made me want to follow him. My grandma was all of those things (kind, gentle, meek, mild) and she bought me ice cream. I was more inclined to follow her! I was at church because she was there and I would have gone anywhere with her. Jesus became important to me much later. And it began to happen the first time someone talked seriously to me about today's story of Jesus in the temple. Finally, it was a story I could relate to. Jesus was mad. I can follow *that* Jesus!

Let's look at why Jesus was mad. Some of us may have been taught that Jesus was mad because there were people at the temple selling things and commerce shouldn't be mixed with church. Or maybe we were taught that "money changers" didn't belong in the temple. Neither of these were the problem. According to authors Borg and Crossan, "...money changers and animal sellers were perfectly legitimate and

necessary for the temple's normal functioning. The buying and selling all took place in the huge Court of the Gentiles. Money changers were needed so that Jewish pilgrims could pay the temple tax in the only approved coinage. Buying animals and birds on site was the only way pilgrims could be sure the creatures were ritually adequate for sacrifice" (Borg and Crossan, 48). So, if these things were all ok, why was Jesus mad?

Jesus was mad because, while the temple was functioning as usual, the temple authorities, whose job it was to represent the people to God, were more interested in their own relationships with the Roman government. Jesus' activity in the temple was an absolute criticism, not only of the ways in which the Romans used oppression and violence to dominate the Jewish people, but also a criticism of the Jewish temple authorities, and other aristocrats, who collaborated with the Romans.

In Mark's story of Jesus driving out buyers and sellers, overturning tables and seats, his actions weren't about shutting down or cleansing the temple, but were instead symbolic of destroying the temple. If we have any doubt about this interpretation, we can look ahead to Tuesday when Jesus and his disciples walk by the fig tree again and see that it is not just seasonally dormant, but, having been cursed by Jesus, was "withered away to its roots" (Mark 11:20).

\*In addition to Jesus' actions in the temple, he also had some words for the people there, "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." Jesus' words were borrowed from the prophet Jeremiah. The text is from Jeremiah 7 when the prophet was directed by God to stand in front of the temple and confront the people with their sin on their way in. You see, the people had gotten quite comfortable with the idea that God dwelled with them in the temple. They would come to the temple to sacrifice and worship God and then go back to doing what they were doing. The problem was, what they were doing was not what they should have been doing.

Here are God's words to the people, through Jeremiah, "If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you act justly with one another; if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever...Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?"

In other words, you can't mistreat the ones who are most vulnerable and then come to the temple and hide behind your worship and sacrifices. Over and over, in the Hebrew Bible, we are told by God, "I reject your worship because of your lack of justice." The prophet Amos said, "...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Hosea said, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." And Micah said, "...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Borg and Crossan point out, that since God is just and the world belongs to God, worship cannot be separated from justice because worship or union with a God of justice empowers the worshipper for a life of justice (Borg and Crossan, 46).

Jeremiah goes on to tell the people what will happen if they continue their behavior:

Go now to my place in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh" (Jeremiah 7:12-14).

The threat in Jeremiah is clear, if God's temple is used as a place where worship is substituted for justice, God will destroy the temple, since it

has become a safe place for perpetrators of injustice (Borg and Crossan, 46). The same was true in Jesus' day. The temple authorities, who were supposed to be representing the people to God, were participating in the Roman system of domination, collecting taxes for the government, hiding behind temple theology, creating safety for themselves while God's people were being oppressed and exploited.

\*Mark's Jesus, like Jeremiah and other prophets, understood what happens to God's people when religion is used to carry out injustice. They are disconnected from God and from each other. They are eventually destroyed.

I know that you know what injustice is. I know that many of you are active in this community doing the work of justice. One of our core values is "justice through service." That's our way of saying we are aware that it will require us to *do something* to bring about justice. I promised you, when I came here, that I would be a leader who leads by being involved in the community and using my voice on behalf of the ones who haven't found their voice or who are not yet being heard. One of the ways I have tried to do that is by writing letters to the editor, for the most part, in response to letters written by people who see biblical interpretation and justice differently than I do. I included the most recent letter I wrote in the last DiscipleGram. I hope you read it and have had the opportunity to think about it.

There have been some responses to that letter that I want you to be aware of. I received a letter here at the church, signed Concerned Christians of Bartlesville, which was critical of the way in which I interpret the Bible. The point of the letter was that, in this person's opinion, the Bible is not open for interpretation, but should be taken literally, exactly as it was originally written. This person quoted passages from the New International Version and, clearly, the irony of that was lost on him or her. The other response I want you to be aware of is a little more unsettling. I was informed, through a community acquaintance, that another minister in Bartlesville used his sermon

time last Sunday to criticize me. He began by putting a picture of me on the screen in the sanctuary and ridiculed the fact that I signed my letter to the editor "Reverend Kelley Becker." He continued from there with a critique of the practice of a woman being allowed in the pulpit. And then he spent the rest of his sermon hour offering his theological explanation of the contents of the letter I wrote.

I have to wonder, why this "minister" would put my picture on the screen. I have to wonder why the letter I wrote was worthy of an entire hour of worship time. And for a brief moment, I wondered why I do this work. And then: I. Got. Really. Angry. And I remembered the passage I'm preaching on today and my history with this passage. One of the reasons Jesus is important to me is that he was mad about the things that make me mad. This story of Jesus' symbolic destruction of the temple reminds us that without justice, our worship is nothing. We can make no mistake about it: God's justice values the innate worth of all human beings. Our job as Christians, our job as the Church, is to be on the right side of justice. Our job is to make God's love accessible to everyone.

I tell you this today for no other reason than to remind you that our voices of love and inclusion matter, that how we spend the time we have matters. People, who were created by God, and who God loves deeply, are being told that who were they created to be is wrong, bad, sinful and not enough. We are called to be the voice of truth; the voice of love. As the song during the prelude this morning says, we are called to continually ask ourselves, "Does our worship have hands, does it have feet, does it stand up in the face of injustice?" I will leave you this morning with part of a private message that was I received about the letter to the editor. I've used it with permission:

"...When I was growing up, if I would have had someone in my life that taught about God's love and acceptance, instead of the judgment and criticism usually reserved for gay men and women, my life would have been drastically different. I was blessed with a wonderful and

understanding family, but some aren't and I want them to hear they are loved as well. All this to say thank you for your letter.

Amen.