

Church – a house of prayer

Mark 11:15-33; Isaiah 56:1-8; Jer. 7:8-11

A preacher's young daughter noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day she asked him why. "Well, honey," he began, thrilled that his daughter was paying attention during his sermons, "I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon." To which she replied, "Then, how come He doesn't do it?"

Years ago, a new business in the US began. It was up to the date business research and census information research about each particular community. I don't know if it expanded to Canada. They put together suggestions for each church with the focus on church growth. It was a simple helpful tool for a congregation to learn about the community it lived in. They offered a free introductory package to get churches interested in buying the full package.

I used this resource in churches that I pastored and consulted with. To my disappointment, few congregations wanted to go beyond the introductory package even though it was reasonably priced for what it offered. The information was helpful for congregations to understand their immediate community – to get them beyond their biases and assumptions.

But it always offered a common recommendation. It said the number one way to do outreach was to offer recreation. I think at the time this was a great recommendation to connect with people and show the community you cared about them. Especially since many of the locations where the churches were, didn't have much to offer people for recreation. And it had a list of health related activities for all age groups and a variety of other ways to connect.

But the recommendations could have had more emphasis on increasing the prayer capacity of the congregations. I think many congregations could improve their prayer-life. Other problems might include getting people to attend services, securing spiritual results from our ministry,

finding the right leaders for various activities; the problems of finance, and the problems created by the lack of love and unity which so often prevails among Christians.

These are important but if the prayer life of a congregation is healthy, most if not all other problems find a solution. Prayer is the very life of the church. It's the life of individual church members, of the worship time, of small groups, and the varied activities. It's a reason I took time praying in our YouTube worship.

Coincidentally, another resource was being offered at the same time as the community evangelism one. It was a survey of congregational health. It's called Natural Church Development. It's a guide to eight essential qualities of healthy churches. They include: Inspiring worship services. Loving relationships. Gift-oriented ministry. Empowering leadership. Passionate spirituality. Functional structures. Holistic small groups. And Need-oriented evangelism. Each congregational member was asked to fill out a survey and then the congregational results were shared. Next a plan was put into place to work on each of the areas, especially strengthening the weaker ones.

But not much traction occurred with Mennonite churches that I knew. Most of them measured very low in passionate spirituality. This was a shock and discouraged many. Now some of it was that the survey questions asked, reflected a more evangelical church culture than a traditional Mennonite church culture. But I think the results did give a sense of the reality of congregational life. So let's look at the importance of churches being a house of prayer.

The prophet Isaiah offers a wonderful vision of salvation for others, beyond the people of Israel. It includes those who had been formerly excluded from worship: this includes foreigners and eunuchs who maintain justice and do right; who keep the Sabbath; keep their hands from doing evil; who have bound themselves to the Lord; who hold fast to the Creator's covenant. "These I will bring to my holy mountain, and

make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my **house shall be called a house of prayer** for all peoples.” (56:7) What a beautiful promise! Those previously excluded from the temple would find a place, a name, a spiritual family. They will find joy, acceptance, & a place of prayer.

So it should not surprise us that we have a story, which is in every one of the Gospels, of Jesus clearing out the temple. John has it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and the other Gospels have it after the Triumphal Entry. I think William Barclay explains it well. “John was more interested in the truth than in the facts.” John seems to be mainly interested in showing Jesus as the Son of God, so he liked to tie into the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. And the cleansing of the temple was the act of the promised Messiah of Yahweh. So he has this event early in his Gospel.

It’s important to notice the timing of this story in the other Gospels. This timing is in itself an important message. Jesus had been in the temple, looking around, at the end of the Triumphal Entry. And he was soon going to be arrested and rise from the grave. This wasn’t the first time he was in the temple, but I suspect he began planning for this day.

A little history here might help set the stage of how important the temple was to Jewish religious life and identity. First there was the **tabernacle** that God instructed the people of Israel to build after they escaped from Egypt. This was a movable structure.

Then in I Kings (8:10-11) we read God’s glory filled **Solomon’s Temple**, so full the priests couldn’t get in. The Temple was where God lived and where His people could meet with Him. It was the holiest place in the land and the focal point of their worship. Later it was destroyed when enemies invaded the land, and God’s people were taken to Babylon.

Then there was **Zerubbabel’s temple**. When the Jews returned after seventy years of exile, a second Temple was constructed, which was nothing compared to Solomon’s. The people had taken care of themselves by building their own houses and focusing on their income. So Haggai the prophet condemned this and told them to build God’s house. It’s named after the governor of Judah at the time, Zerubbabel’s Temple. (Hg. 2:3) It lasted for about 500 years.

The temple Jesus saw was **Herod’s Temple**. This was an amazing edifice and was built as a grandiose gift to the Jews. It was a tribute to Herod’s haughtiness. It took 46 years to finish. To give you a feel for the size, the columns were so mammoth that it took three people with their hands outstretched to surround a column at its base. Everything in the Temple symbolized something that communicated God’s power & purposes. For example, when children would ask about the meaning behind the pillars, parents would answer: “Our God is so great that He upholds the heavens and the earth.”

The Temple was humongous and it was huge in the eyes of every Jewish person. It was sacred. It had huge walls. The first sacred space was called the **Court of the Gentiles**. It was where non-Jewish people were allowed to worship and pray. This was a walled, marble-paved section to the south side of the Temple and was about three football fields long and around 250 yards wide. Anyone Gentile could go in but Gentiles could go no further into the temple.

The next area was the **Court of the Women**, for Jewish women, and they were not allowed to go farther into the temple. There was the **Court of the Israelites** – for Jewish men only. Next was the **Court of the Priests**. Inside that was a special building, the inner actual temple. But Jesus upset these rules and restrictions with his actions, teachings, death and resurrection.

We know that Jesus observed what went on in the temple a number of times. Each and every time he visited the Temple, he was angry and very grieved. He saw religious ceremonies

carried out with little relationship to the Holy Spirit. He saw injustice, commercialism, exploitation, hypocrisy and a disregard for the holiness of His Father. Temple worship was not as it should be. So his waiting until regular business hours in the morning, when there were lots of people there, instead of the evening after the Triumphal Entry, was on purpose.

We need to remember what Jeremiah the prophet said about God's house years earlier. "You are clinging to lies and illusions that are worthless. Do you think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and chase after other gods and still expect Me to protect you? Do you think all it takes is for you to run back to Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We're safe now'? Does this somehow make it all right to do these vile things in front of Me? **Do you think this house, which is called by My name, is a den of thieves?** I see what you're doing." (Jeremiah 7:8-11)

In the Mark 11 text, Jesus considered the religious leaders a bunch of robbers. By filling the outer court with merchandise, they robbed Gentiles of their place of prayer. Through excessive profit-taking, in an enforced monopoly, they robbed pilgrims, and especially the poor. Ultimately they were robbing God. They stole the honor that belongs to God and they withheld their love. (Mark 12:38-40)

In Mark 12, Jesus warns and condemns the religious leaders. He said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

Also in Mark 12, Jesus says, The religious leaders are not giving to the Almighty what belongs to God, which is themselves. They themselves produce no fruit for their Lord, and

they steal the produce of the vineyard that has been entrusted to them. (12:28-34)

Jesus didn't hold anything back of his disgust. When people entered the temple grounds, to seek the divine's presence, they encountered a noisy uproar. The one aim of the sellers was to exact as high a price as possible. The pilgrims argued and defended themselves with equal fierceness. They knew temple corruption.

When people would travel from a long distance to come to the Temple they had to pay the annual temple tax. But they couldn't use Greek or Roman money because of the graven images on it. They would then change their money into Temple money so they could pay the tax. But usually the exchange rate was extortionate. In addition, because most people wouldn't bring animals with them to the Temple, to offer sacrifices, they would have to buy what they needed right there – approved animals only. All this made it expensive to worship.

And, the section of the Temple that was supposed to be for Gentiles had been turned into a combination stock exchange and flea market with exorbitant rates & huge surcharges on animals to be offered as sacrifices. While people could buy doves elsewhere in town, the priests would do an inspection and usually declare them unacceptable. They would then receive a kickback from the temple dove-sellers after people would buy their "acceptable" ones. Jesus proclaimed, "To those who sold doves he said, 'Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!'" The Jews themselves were aware of these abuses & swindles.

One commentator said that the price for a dove purchased outside the Temple was the equivalent of a day's wages, but inside the Temple it was equivalent to 45 day's wages. Exchange rates could easily consume half a day's wage for the average person. Jesus had no tolerance for this. Not only was it wrong and a hindrance to worship, but the Temple had been trivialized into a commercial enterprise. People were paying, not praying in God's holy house.

So when Jesus got to Jerusalem that morning he made a beeline to the Temple area & began driving out those who were buying and selling there. This word literally means “to eject.” While many wanted Him to attack the Romans and set up His kingdom, Jesus launched a surprise attack against “religion.” Like an Old Testament prophet, Jesus acted out a parable – like some of the Old Testament prophets did. Only He was not acting. He was indignant and irate. This wasn’t the first time he was angry at organized Jewish temple religion. We read in Mark 3:5: “He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.”

Why was Jesus angry? In summary - He was angry at exploitation of pilgrims. He was angry at desecration of God’s holy place. Jesus was angry at exclusiveness of Jewish worship, barring Gentiles. He was angry at meaningless worship. This was the same basic problem the prophets in the Old Testament protested about.

And Jesus’ actions were symbolic of the end of animal sacrifice. Because he himself was the sacrifice in a few days. Plus, the punchline, concluding charge was, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

So what exactly did Jesus do? He did three things. First, he overturned the tables of the money changers. They supported the temple costs but things had become so bad that they were more interested in profiteering than helping people worship. Plus they ignored the warning of the Old Testament prophets.

Second, Jesus overturned the benches of those selling doves. The coins are clanging on the marble floor while feathers are flying all over.

Third, He blocked anyone from carrying merchandise through the Temple courts. This sacred structure had become a shortcut to the Mount of Olives. This of course reduces the meaning of a sacred space.

There’s something else going on. If you study Leviticus and Numbers, you’ll see that the priests were constantly bringing in animals to slaughter on the altar. They would sprinkle the blood on the altar of incense and then they would have to carry the dead carcasses back out again. In addition, other supplies like firewood, oil for the lamps, and sharp knives would be brought in. Ray Stedman suggests that there was a steady progression of priests through the Temple all day long. Plus all the noise, organized chaos and commercialism.

So on this day, Jesus not only stopped the sales; He stopped the sacrifices. This is highly symbolic because in just a few days, His body would become the final sacrifice for sin, rendering all other sacrifices completely useless. This act of stopping, cleansing Temple worship sealed His death as Mark 11, verse 18 says that the chief priests and the teachers of the law “began looking for a way to kill Him.”

Jesus was essentially condemning the entire sacrificial system and many of their ideas about faithfulness to their Creator. The Temple would not be necessary because Jesus was now going to become the meeting place between people and God where sins would be dealt with.

I share all this, simply to remind us, as smart and knowledgeable as we are, as sophisticated as we can be, and as progressive as we like to think we are, we still can forget and be so busy doing church, that we miss the mark of being a house of prayer. The dramatics of this story fascinate us because Jesus seems so out of character. But that’s exactly why we should not miss the point. Prayer and worship is what church is about at its core. Connecting with Jesus can so easily get pushed aside even in our religious activities. Prayer simply then becomes a minor part of our worship and spiritual lives.

Congregations gain reputations for a variety of traits – worship, music, preaching, evangelism, mission, service, emphasis on the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, being well organized, a

denominational church and so on. But how many are known for being a house of prayer?

We need to remind ourselves again that the early disciples: “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread & the **prayer**.” (Acts 2:42)
May our church be a house of prayer.

Isaiah 56 This is what the LORD says:
“Maintain justice and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.
2 Blessed is the one who does this—
the person who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it,
and keeps their hands from doing any evil.”
3 Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD
say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from
his people.”
And let no eunuch complain,
“I am only a dry tree.”
4 For this is what the LORD says:
“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—
5 to them I will give within my temple and its
walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.
6 And foreigners who bind themselves to
the LORD to minister to him,
to love the name of the LORD, and to be his
servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”
8 The Sovereign LORD declares—
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:

“I will gather still others to them
besides those already gathered.”

Mark 11:15-33 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”^[b]

¹⁸ The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

¹⁹ When evening came, Jesus and his disciples^[c] went out of the city.

²⁰ In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹ Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

²² “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “Truly^[d] I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” ^[26] ^[e]

They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ²⁸ “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ³⁰ John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!”

³¹ They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ ³² But if we say, ‘Of human origin’ ...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

³³ So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”