

LENT – A JOURNEY TO EASTER
4. THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

(03/22/2020)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 21:12-17

Then Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” (Matthew 21:12-13)

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent, the time set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter, is forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday.

This is the second week that our church, in compliance with Governor Baker’s restrictions on public gatherings and the counsel of the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, has suspended Sunday morning worship and all other church activities and gatherings. The way things look right now, I am quite sure that we will not be celebrating Easter as the gathered church.

As I mentioned last week, it is a strange experience preaching in an empty church. One of the things I miss is music. We have a lot of music in our Sunday morning service: an organ or piano prelude, an introit, an anthem, two hymns, the Gloria Patri, the Doxology, a meditative piano postlude, and the final organ postlude. Bob L’Heureux and I pick out the hymns, usually to go with the theme of the service or the sermon.

However, the selection of hymns in a time of social distancing, of sheltering in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, would pose a special challenge. Some of our hymns are just not politically correct at a time when a pandemic is shaking the medical, social, and economic fabric of our nation. For example:

“We Gather Together”	NOPE!
“I Come to the Garden Alone”	YUP!
“Gather Us In”	NOPE!
“Trust and Obey”	YUP!
“Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life”	NOPE!
“Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters”	YUP!

I hope this gives you a sense of how difficult it could be to select hymns for a worship service at a time like this! (I know what you're thinking—other people have much more serious problems. I guess that's true.)

This morning, as we reflect on Jesus' first act after entering Jerusalem at the beginning of what we know as Holy Week, I would like to begin by sharing the following story. Perhaps it is a parable.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for their own safety, they went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, and eventually it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station. They gave of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were purchased, and new crews were trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that their building was so crude and poorly equipped. They wanted to provide a more comfortable place as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

The lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely in keeping with its increased utilization for social events. Fewer members were now interested in actually going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's official insignia, however, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

One evening, right in the middle of the most important social function of the year, a large ship from a foreign land was wrecked off the coast. The hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty, sick, and different in many ways from the established members of the club.

The usually clean and orderly club was in chaos. Some of the members were indignant that their social events should be disrupted and that the club should be overrun with people who were dirty and sick. So, the next day, the property committee had a shower house built outside

the club where the victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up and where they could stay until other arrangements had been made.

At the next club meeting, there was a heated debate. Some of the established members of the club were concerned about what would happen if all the different kinds of shipwrecked people were to apply for club membership. They wondered what would happen to the character, the personality, the ambiance of the club. That was the word they used: “ambiance.” These members proposed that they phase out the club's lifesaving activities as being difficult, dangerous, unpleasant, and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club.

Other members disagreed. They insisted that lifesaving was the reason the club came into existence; that lifesaving was the primary purpose of the club, and it always should be. These members pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station, that this was reflected in the official insignia, and that they still had a ceremony where the members gathered around a liturgical lifeboat once a week. But these members were finally voted down. They were told that if they were really that interested in saving the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could build their own lifesaving station down the coast. And so, they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had taken place in the old. It evolved into a club, the membership split, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

When I heard this little story many years ago when I was in theological school, I thought about the church. What does it mean to be the church? What are the marks of a successful church? What does it mean to be true to our calling? And what are the factors that would lead us astray, that would cause us to become something other than the church that Jesus wants us to be? Since the story appears in one of the first books I read on pastoral counseling, it also drew me to pastoral counseling as a specialized ministry.

Although there was no Christian church when Jesus lived, there is no doubt that Jesus cared about the church. Bart Ehrman, the biblical scholar whose seminar we had been viewing in our Sunday morning Bible study, maintains that one of the statements that we can make with a good deal of certainty about the pre-Easter Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, was that he was the

intentional founder of a religious movement. If he had had no intention of founding a movement, why would he have chosen disciples whom he groomed to be apostles?

Professor Ehrman believes that at the very least, Jesus intended to usher in a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day. The cleansing of the Temple, which stirred up so much animosity in the people, would have been an expression of this zeal. This movement later became the Christian church.

Jesus cared about the emerging church, the fellowship of believers that he entrusted to his disciples, just as he cared about his Jewish culture and the Jewish religion. He drew heavily from the Jewish scriptures, especially the wisdom literature and the teachings of the prophets in his teaching. He took the religious leaders of his people to task for not living up to their calling. We know he entered into Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate the Passover, one of the great pilgrim festivals of the Jewish faith.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on the day that we celebrate as Palm Sunday. The very next thing he does is cleanse the Temple. He drives out those who are selling and buying animals to be sacrificed. He drives out those who are functioning as international bankers, charging a fee to change people's money from their country of origin to the currency of Roman-occupied Jerusalem. He knocks over the cages, setting the animals free, and he tips over the tables, scattering the money all over the floor. Then he drives the temple merchants out with a whip.

This scene reminds us that Jesus was human. He could get angry, though we should note that he only gets angry when he cares about something very deeply. The Temple was important to Jesus. He did not want it to be defiled by the Romans, and he certainly did not want it to be defiled by his own people. If Jesus didn't care about the Temple and about what should take place in this sacred space, he wouldn't have been as angry as he obviously was.

During our Lenten reflections, as we journey toward Easter, this passage of scripture leads us to a deeper understanding of Jesus' humanity, his feelings, and how deeply offended he was at what was happening to his place of worship. It also leads us to ask what this passage of scripture means for us. Would Jesus be happy with the church in our time, the church as it presently exists? Would he be proud of it—the church that bears his name? Or would he be disappointed? Would he see the Christian church of our time as defiled, not pure, not true to its calling? Would he feel that it was in need of a radical cleansing? And is this true of our little church as well?

Jesus challenges us as twenty-first century disciples to sort out the wheat from the chaff in our lives and also in the church. Just like the little lighthouse, we need to know why we are here. We need to know and remember our meaning and purpose. This should inform everything we do as a church.

If Jesus were to speak to the church of our time (which, of course, he does), what would he say? I think he would remind us of four central themes.

First, we need to remember that the source of our life is God. If we place anything else in the center of our life as a church, we become like a branch that is cut off from the true vine; we become something other than the church.

Second, Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, would remind us that we need to build genuine community within the church. We need to be a church where all are welcome. Where *all* are welcome! One of the graces of our little church is the spirit of hospitality. We open our church and our arms to all who wish to join with us in our life and mission, and we welcome them into our fellowship. If we do not do this, we become something other than the church.

Third, we need to remember that we are called to be a mission church. We need to reach out to those in need, not only members of our fellowship but all of God's children. Jesus would tell us that we in the church are charged with carrying on God's healing, challenging, life-giving work of reconciliation throughout the world. We are to feed the hungry not only with bread, but also with the Bread of Life. When we do not do this, we become something other than the church.

And fourth, the church needs to have a sense of its uniqueness. We are not a social club or an entertainment center. There is one thing we can do that no other institution on earth can do: help bring people closer to God through the life and teaching of Jesus. We do this by word, through worship, by the example we set, and through our outreach ministry. The church is meant to be for our time and for our world what the early apostles were for their time and their world.

When we forget that which is uniquely ours to share, we become like a lifesaving station that forgets that it is supposed to save people from the perils of the waves. We become a social club. We become something other than the church.

The apostle Paul, who founded many mission churches and who, through his letters, provided them with guidelines for creating and maintaining genuine Christian community, reminds us that we, you and I, are the church. He tells us that we are the temple, the dwelling

place of the Holy Spirit, and that Christ lives in us. If this is true, then we need to help Jesus cleanse the temple that is ourselves. We need to cleanse ourselves of all impurities, of all that defiles our bodies and our minds.

First Community Church is this beautiful building, which we care about just as Jesus cared about the Temple. However, our church is much more than this building. This church is a community of believers, a community of faith. In addition to our life as the gathered church, we are also the scattered church. As we proclaim on the sign outside our front door, each and every one of us is the church, the place where God's healing and reconciling work is being carried on in the world.

When we are true to our calling as the gathered or the scattered church, we may be able to experience or at least glimpse the deeper teaching that the church is the mystical body of Christ. The church is meant to be the living incarnation of the risen Christ in our time, the focal point of God's action in the world.

Immediately after he enters Jerusalem, Jesus cleanses the Temple. He calls the church of his day to return to its calling, just as he calls us, this community of believers gathered here in Southborough, to return to our calling, to be his hands, to incarnate his presence in the world. As we do this, we witness to the risen Christ and help to usher in the kingdom of God on earth.

We need to remember that, just like the little lighthouse, our job is to save lives.

If we are true to our calling both as individuals and as a church, we will journey through the Lenten wilderness experiences of our lives to the transformation, the resurrection, the new life to which God calls us.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

The First Community Church of Southborough

www.firstcommunitychurch.com

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