

## **“Bring me to the Temple”**

**Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant 4/14/19**

We just concluded a four part series on the historical Jesus and the first church, captured in a film series that the Cardwell's so graciously put on for us last month. It was very informative, evoking some interesting conversations. One fascinating piece of the narrative included a historical look into the importance of the Temple in first century Judaism. There is no escaping how the Temple in Jerusalem was the focal point of the religion, and in many ways the culture as well. When it was destroyed by a Roman army in 70 C.E., it forced Jews to rethink its role in their religious and cultural lives. The Temple in many ways shifted from a physical structure in Jerusalem to the many local synagogues scattered throughout the Greco-Roman empire. These, instead, became the main houses of worship and religious centering. Unsurprisingly though it was in Jesus' final week of life that going to the Temple was his first priority. After arriving to Jerusalem for the Passover week, the highest of holy days, entering into the city with fanfare from his followers, he stopped by the Temple. He would go back to the Temple again and again, and in those visits observing things that surely he had observed countless times before, but this time he was fed up with it. Angered by what he was observing, he boldly tells the crowds listening to him, “the Temple is to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of thieves.” I believe there is a lot to unpack here. Jesus has already made a movement away from the Temple as the “critical” center of worship, simply when spending time with a growing community of faith along the Jordan River: The disciples of John. This is where Jesus got his start, really, with his cousin John the Baptist—a prophet in his own right, baptizing people in the Jordan and living away from Jerusalem, not unlike the many other zealots of his day, like the Essenes of Qumran. They had already drifted away from Jerusalem's Temple as the center of their faith because of its corruption. They were seeking a more pure form of religion, a purer faith. Jesus himself, when later talking with the Samaritan woman, clarifies the unimportance of Jerusalem and the Temple mount when he said, “there is coming a day, and in fact it has already come when it will not matter whether you worship God on this mount or that one, because is God is seeking true worshipers, those who will worship God in spirit and in truth.” This divergence from Temple-centeredness (at least the centering on the actual structure) was already in motion.

However in the final week of Jesus' life, he focused on the Temple specifically—and he was unhappy with what he saw. As his own ministry was winding down, perhaps Jesus felt compelled to address the worst abuse of power within his own religion, an oppression that simply could be no longer tolerated, and he was to make his last stand at the Temple itself. He was watching the money changers taking advantage of foreigners entering the Temple area. This seems to be an undisputed fact by scholars. Jesus is so outrage that he drives out the people preying on the migrant travelers. Jesus became physically upset, and in one of the only reports of Jesus becoming visibly livid about something, he let his anger show. It is interesting that Jesus' first and final public outburst revolved specifically around diversity and inclusivity. Let me explain:

The scripture Jesus himself quoted from in the book of Isaiah gives us plenty of clues as to what exactly angered Jesus so much that day. But we can start simply with the Greek as well. This is the author of the

book of Mark translating what Jesus may have said, and putting it into Greek, and the word he uses for 'nations' when he quotes Jesus saying the "house of prayer for all nations" is the word *ethnos*. This specifically refers to the ethnicity of the people, let alone their nationality. There is an idea of racial differences in the people he is referring to. However, this can be further confirmed in the totality of the scripture from which Jesus quotes, which is from Isaiah 56. In that passage the Lord commands them at the very top, to "Maintain justice and do what is right." Then in the part that Jesus specifically quotes from, God speaks of the "foreigners" he will draw to the Temple and "give them joy in my house of prayer," because "my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." It makes sense that the context of this outrage is the treatment of foreigners, for it would be primarily the foreigners who would have need for the money changers, needing to complete a currency exchange.

What was so special about the Temple? Jesus again using the prophet Isaiah's own words, tells us the importance of the place—or better yet—the activity itself. He says "house of prayer" or in Hebrew "Bais Tefillah." Bais means house or home, and Tefillah refers to prayer, however, Tefillah means more than that. While the root of the word means to think, ponder on God, it also means to evaluate or judge back to oneself. There is a bit of both, a focus on divine and back on human. But most intriguing of the idea of Tefillah, is its notion of connectedness with God. This is referred to by many in the word "communication," connoting a back and forth of sorts; this is what I often refer to as communing. However, I am most enamored with the idea of connectedness. Connectedness carries with it an implication of place. For example, when we plug in our phone charger, the plug fits perfectly into the wall—as if it was meant for that specific place all along. It's not trying to cram a square peg into a round hole. There is a perfect spot. Or when we plug our USB cord into the computer, it fits perfectly, snugly, right? It snaps into place, like the plug and was perfectly made for the that slot. Tefillah carries that kind of meaning with it. There is something so natural about it, as if you've been longing all your life to be plugged back into your Creator. And Jesus was upset because people had made it difficult for all people to feel that kind of connectedness. The passage into prayer with God was blocked by the greed of commerce and free enterprise. No one should be prevented from connecting with God. No one.

Our prejudices, our indifferences, our economic pursuits, our tribalism, our religious fervor, our self-righteousness—none of it should be an obstacle for another to be connected to God. If it is. Drive it out. Drive it out of your personal Temple. Your essence, your being should be open to all. Jesus taught us a lesson of intentional inclusivity, and a hopefulness in our diversity. We must make this our goal as well, as a community of faith founded on the idea of unity with others. We should seek opportunities to stand alongside the suffering, the marginalized, and instead of simply taking up our own cross daily—we should take up the cross of those around us as well—just as Simon of Cyrene, the foreigner from North Africa, would do later on Friday for our Lord Jesus. The Temple is in our hearts. We connect with God from within and also in our actions from without. Let us enter the Temple daily, and let us not be alone.

In the spirit of diversity and unity, please join us on Thursday at Gospel Community Church as we join with them and Rivermont Baptist Church in a Maundy Thursday community meal at 5:30 and worship at 6:30. We did this last year and it again will be a rich time of fellowship and love. So, let us seek community together, reaching beyond our borders to those all around us. Shalom