

Mark 11:15-19 Holy Week 2006
“All Show and No Fruit.”

The third act of the Gospel of Mark is Holy Week.

Just so you know, Act I of Mark's Gospel is about the Ministry of Jesus in the Galilee. Act II is about his ministry beyond the Galilee, in Greek territory. Act III of Mark begins with Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt, as we remembered Sunday. The crowd gave him a royal welcome, expecting something spectacular, even supernatural was about to happen, which never did (at least that day).

That same afternoon Jesus went to the Temple to look around, then returned to Bethany, located on the back side of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem, to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, to his bed and breakfast.

Monday morning Jesus headed back to Jerusalem, and as he crested the top of the Mount of Olives, he could gaze on the Temple in all its Glory. Today you have the same spectacular view from the Mount of Olives, but it's the Islamic Dome of the Rock, not the Temple, that captures your attention.

Proceeding down the hill, or Mount if you prefer, Mark says, Jesus was attracted to a Fig Tree, for he was hungry; but when he got to the tree, he found it had nothing but Leaves—it was all show and no fruit!

The traditional view is that he cursed the Tree, but the tree was not really that big a deal. He had something much more important than figs on his mind when he said to the tree: “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”

Given the circumstances—with the Temple in plain sight and knowing what he planned to do--it's clear that the Fig Tree is only an allegory of the Temple. The Temple, too, had become all show but no fruit, and would, indeed, cease to produce any fruit at all after it was destroyed by the Romans, following their siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

When Jesus arrived at the Temple Mount, he immediately began to disrupt those who were corrupting the true meaning and purpose of the Temple. The court of the Gentiles had become almost entirely secularized. It was meant to be a place of prayer and preparation, but the commercialized atmosphere of buying and selling made prayer and meditation impossible.

To make matters worse, the business conducted there was a blatant exploitation of the pilgrims who had come for Passover Week. Only animals purchased in the Temple were acceptable for sacrifice, and the only currency accepted for such purchases, was available at an exorbitant, exchange rate. We are talking about a typical pilgrim having to pay the equivalent of half a day's wages for the privilege of worshiping God.

And who benefitted from this rip-off? Annas, the former High Priest, was like a God Father; it was his family which held the franchise for this business, but the entire Temple organization was

on the take.

And another thing that angered Jesus was that the court of the Gentiles had become a short-cut, for the entire city, in and out of Jerusalem. So Jesus also put a stop to anyone carrying anything through the Temple, stopping, at least momentarily, the crowd of foot-traffic interrupting people trying to worship and meditate. Indeed, the Law itself forbade such use of the Temple Mount as a thoroughfare, a law the Temple Authorities conveniently ignored, because the increased traffic gave greater exposure to their businesses.

So, what moved Jesus to such a display of anger? First, he was incensed at the exploitation of human beings, compounded because it was done in the name of religion. Secondly, he was angry at the desecration of God's Holy Place. How could there be a sense of the presence of God, with such commercialization, and trivialization, and disrespect for this most sacred space?

And thirdly, Jesus was greatly offended because, the Temple, according to Isaiah, was to be a house of prayer for all nations. But guess what? A wall had been erected to exclude the Gentiles.

The fact that poor, humble pilgrims were being fleeced, swindled, and imposed upon, and the gentiles were being refused entrance, moved Jesus to use a vivid metaphor to describe what the Temple had become. Referring to the nefarious acts occurring on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, where robbers would hide in caves and wait to attack unsuspecting travelers, Jesus said to the Temple authorities: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den (or cave) of robbers."

Needless to say, his behavior was not received well by the Temple Cult Leaders. Indeed, Jesus's attack on the Temple activities, signed his death warrant. According to the Gospel of Mark, it was this issue over the Temple which led the Priests and Scribes, not the Jews in general, or the Pharisees in particular to perpetrate the death of Jesus.

Mark's earliest readers or hearers after 70 AD, not being residents of Jerusalem but still in shock and grief over the recent destruction of the Temple, would have taken some comfort from Mark's account, because it explained so much. Not only did it tell them who was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, but it also gave a reason why the Temple was destroyed, because, simply stated, it had become all show and no fruit.

And now, the Temple, as seen by the Jews and Jewish Christians to be their primary connection with God, was gone; but the Resurrected Jesus and his eternal presence, would henceforth give a more reliable, more accessible and more personal reality of God to Christian and Jew, and through them, to the whole world.

The Temple and the Christian Church are significantly different in the ways they relate us to God. But when the Church became institutionalized in the 4th Century, it took on many of the problems associated with the Temple. "Power always corrupts," as Lord Acton reminds us, and

the Church became as powerful as the Roman Empire, and with that power, came as much corruption as the Temple ever saw.

There is much in our church history for which we need to be repentant. But we need to also remember that we, too, are sinners just as the priests and scribes were, and it is through sinners like us that institutionalized evil is bred. In spite of the problems we sinners bring to it, however, the Church either as a Building, an institution, or as a Community of Believers, is still a Sacrament: an outward and visible sign of God's Spirit and Grace among us.

And, notwithstanding occasional bad preaching, occasional theological disagreements, and even occasional corruption, belonging to the church is important. As Marcus Borg says "Religious community and tradition put us in touch with the wisdom and beauty of the past". They give us "a path of re-connection and transformation in this life."

But, most important our faith is in a relationship; It is not in buildings, or institutions, in traditions or even religion: at best they are only the finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself. They will serve our spiritual growth and increase our faith in our relationship with God only as long as they help us manifest the gifts and fruits of love.

But love is neither easy nor cheap which this week is intended to illustrate. So as we journey toward Good Friday and Easter, let us be reminded above everything else, of the high cost of love.

As Richard Rohr reminds us, "We know that God is love, but, humans do not want love relationships; we want religion and all its trappings because that is much more comfortable. A love relationship continues to challenge and make demands."

And Rohr continues: "What happened to the body of Jesus is what humans do eternally. We hate what we should love. But God says, in effect, in the words of Jesus Christ Superstar: 'Hate me! Hit me! Hurt me! Nail me to the tree! I love you anyway!'"

So we should never tolerate institutions or religion or communities that are all show and no fruit. But, you know what?. Even when the fruit of love is missing, God loves us anyway!

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