

WRONG TEMPLE, JESUS!

April 17, 2011

The city was bursting at its seams. People had come from every corner of the state, and now they were marching through the streets. As they marched, they shouted, and they sang, and they waved their placards. They were protesting, these people were: protesting the government and its policies. And, with one voice, they called out for change.

Is this a scene from Madison not very many weeks ago? NO! It's a scene from Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago!

It all began in Jerusalem as the annual celebration of the Passover, but it became a protest...a very public protest...against Israel's government. And the protesters...the ones who sang and waved their palm placards...they were the little people of that nation. They were the ones whose livelihoods were precarious. They were the ones who were so deeply oppressed by the Roman occupation and so often forgotten by a self-absorbed king.

There was no question about it: the government in Jerusalem, the government of Israel, was hostile to its people. Rome, the occupying force, was only interested in exploiting Israel with no concern for the people's well-being. Rome tolerated Israel's religion, even though the official religion of the Roman Empire was emperor worship. Rome tolerated Israel's religion, and they made an alliance with its leaders because that religion kept the people of Israel quiet. It is one of those early illustrations of Karl Marx's famous truth:

“Religion is the opiate of the people.”

Nevertheless, in spite of its uneasy alliance with the Roman government, the religious establishment of Israel struggled. That religious establishment was nearly paralyzed by the rules and the restrictions that had been imposed upon it. There was no possible social dimension to that religion's expression. That religion could not have a free, or independent, or critical voice because it existed, day by day, at the pleasure of the occupying force from Caesar's throne.

Well...then there was the matter of money. The religious establishment of Israel scraped for every dime it had, and there was never enough. So the religion of Israel got very creative, and they came up with a system that was even better at raising money than bingo. And the system went like this: when you came to the temple you had to sacrifice an animal, but the only acceptable sacrificial animals had to be bought in the temple court. (If you brought one from home, it was no good.) And, of course, sacrificial animals in the temple court bore an outlandish price tag. And then there was the matter of what you needed to use to buy those animals. You couldn't use the currency of the realm. You couldn't use something that bore the image of Caesar. No, you had to use temple currency, and the conversion rate from Roman currency to that temple currency was legalized robbery. Well, it wasn't pretty, but it worked. It's how the religion of Israel survived financially...but just barely.

Both then and now, you know, the church lives in the world. Spiritual inspiration can't be separated from limited temporal provisions, and so our Every Member Canvass still is working for this year, for this church, to close a \$30,000 gap. Dealing, you see, with financial realities in the church is necessary, no matter how unspiritual it seems and no matter how distasteful it feels.

And that's how things were in Israel and in its religious establishment: scraping for every dime it could get, living under the thumb of an oppressive government. That's the situation that Jesus faced when the Passover throngs swept Him into their capital city. The people who welcomed Him said to Him:

Set us free from this government, Jesus! And now that we've welcomed You to this city, we want You to go to the temple of Roman autocracy. We want You to go to the Praetorium, and we want You to send Pontius Pilate straight home to Caesar! And then, when You're done there, go to the temple of royal sovereignty, Jesus! Go to the palace of Herod Antipas, and claim his throne for Your own!

That's what the people wanted Jesus to do. That's what they expected Jesus to do. That's what they demanded that Jesus do...but that's not what Jesus did! Instead of doing that, Jesus went to the temple of Israel's religion. Can you believe it? And there, in the temple of Israel's religion, Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers, and He chased out the merchants of sacrificial animals, and He said all the while He was doing it:

My house shall be called a house of prayer!

In the name of prayer, Jesus destroyed the only viable income stream of Israel's religious establishment. Try paying your bills with prayers, Jesus!

Well, I can imagine (although the gospel writers don't record it) that what the crowd was at least thinking if they weren't saying it was:

Wrong temple, Jesus! You went to the wrong temple! Why did you go there? The problem in Israel is with the government, not with our religion!

In ancient Jerusalem, just as it is today, we so often externalize the focus of our difficulties. In our own state of Wisconsin our problem is our state's deficit, and that's not an issue we can dismiss because you and I, not somebody else, are the state of Wisconsin. And, whether or not we approve of the policies and tactics of the governor, the problem is real, and it's ours.

Jesus takes this temptation of ours to externalize and blame, and turns the focus on us. Jesus says:

The problem isn't with those folks out there. The problem is your relationship to God and with one another.

That's why Jesus cleansed the temple. That's why Jesus insisted on making the temple about prayer, not profit. That's why He wanted it to be about peace, not power. And the crowd said:

Wrong temple, Jesus!

Yet that's the temple He cleansed.

So, friends, what would happen today if Jesus came to our temple? What would happen if Jesus came to this temple...to Union Church? What traditions, what programs, what priorities, what projects would Jesus sweep away here to make room for peace and prayer in this church?

What would happen if Jesus came to our temple today: not to this church but to the temple of our hearts? What would happen if Jesus came to that temple...our temple, today? What thoughts, what desires, what concerns, what commitments would Jesus sweep away in us to make room for peace and prayer?

The crowd in Jerusalem welcomed Jesus. They celebrated, and shouted, and sang for Jesus when they thought He was coming to do something about somebody else...because they knew that they had problems and they knew it wasn't their fault.

This week I received one of the most frightening, terrifying, horrible emails I have ever gotten; an email that said straight up – and it was a “Christian” email – that every last problem across the whole face of our world can be blamed on all of Islam. This world's got problems, and it's their fault! It was so terrifying to me because it feels so much like the anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1930s.

The crowd wanted Jesus to do His work their way, but Jesus calls us to do His work His way. Remember:

Wrong temple, Jesus! Leave this one alone and take care of them.

No one describes Jesus' way better than does the Apostle Paul. Living Jesus' way means this: it means emptying ourselves, pouring ourselves out. It means taking the form of a slave. It means humbling ourselves. And it means becoming completely obedient to God's love...no exceptions...no exclusions. In word and in deed, Jesus' message on Palm Sunday is this. And that message turned the crowd's anticipation and expectation into frustration and anger that stunned them into silence until, five days later, they found their voice again and, with that newfound voice, they cried out together: ***Crucify Him!*** Now you know why, on the evening of Palm Sunday, Jesus went to Bethany to spend the night. It was safer there! He had friends there who would shelter Him.

Wrong temple, Jesus!

What does Palm Sunday mean for us if we really take Jesus seriously? Well, I think it means that we must protest. But our protest is not protesting what the government is doing *to* us; it is protesting what Jesus is doing *for* us. That is, after all, you know, why we're Protestants... because we protest. It's the heart of the word, and that word means ***to bear witness to Jesus***...to protest.

And, finally, it means that the change Jesus is making in us is nothing less than a change in something as essential as our hearts...not our situations, but our hearts. And when our hearts are changed, changing our situations is up to us. In other words, Jesus didn't come to make us feel good. Jesus came simply to make us good.

So, on this Palm Sunday, I invite you to wave a palm, and give Jesus your heart. Offer your heart to Him, so that He can cleanse it. Open your heart to Him, so that He can fill it. And yield your heart to Him so that, by His side, together, we can serve our God.

And, by God's amazing grace, we will all rejoice to say: ***Right temple, Jesus! Right temple, Jesus!*** Amen.

Charles E. Mize
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Palm Sunday
April 17, 2011