

“Road Rage”

Jeremiah 8:4-13 • Matthew 21:10-22

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 20, 2022

Last week we began a short series of messages leading up to Easter that we’re calling, “Stops on the road to the cross.” We began by looking at Matthew 16 where Jesus first tells his disciples that when they go to Jerusalem he will be arrested, crucified, and raised again. Of course they don’t understand what he’s saying and Peter even tries to rebuke Jesus about it. But Jesus says that as his followers you and I need to give up our own personal desires in order to serve Christ and one another.

This morning we come to the second stop, the town of Bethany outside Jerusalem. This little village is only about 2 miles east of Jerusalem, on the other side of the Mount of Olives. This is where Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus lived. It’s where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, even though he had been buried for several days. I found this interesting: today the Arabic name of the town is essentially “Lazarus’ place.”

The reason we are stopping here on the road to the cross is because we have these three kind of strange events that help us to see who Jesus is and why his crucifixion is so important. The first event is what we usually call his “triumphal entry.” As they approach Bethany, Jesus sends his disciples ahead to bring back a donkey and her colt. He then rides this donkey into Jerusalem. This is during the Passover pilgrimage so there were huge crowds of people traveling on the same roads into the city. They’ve heard of Jesus, the things he has taught and the miracles he has performed. There were many who hoped he was the promised Messiah. So when they see him on the donkey they are immediately reminded of Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” They recognize Jesus as God’s anointed king and they celebrate. Only John’s gospel mentions that the branches the

people cut down were palm branches but that fact is significant. For the people of Israel during Roman occupation, the palm branch was a symbol of defiance and a longing for freedom. This whole scene points us to the fact that Jesus perfectly and permanently fulfills the office of king for God’s people.

The next two stories, Jesus-the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree, are related and are important to understanding Jesus as well. The problem for many of us is that this doesn’t sound like the way we expect Jesus to act. Was he having a bad day? Did Jesus just get fed up about something and take it out on others in the Temple and then by killing a tree? It really makes us uncomfortable to think about Jesus doing that and rightly so. Because Jesus is divine, because He’s God, we need to remember that it’s not in his nature to act out of frustration the way you or I would. So there must be some other explanation.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus arrives in the city he goes to the temple and drives out “all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.” Around the temple were a number of different courts and the outermost court, surrounding the whole temple complex, was called the Court of the Gentiles. Entrance to the inner courts was restricted to certain classes of people but anyone could enter the Court of the Gentiles. That’s where this story takes place.

All Jews were required to pay the half-shekel temple tax every year. Most of the year they could pay it in their hometown, but when it was close to Passover the tax had to be paid at the temple in Jerusalem. It also had to be paid with a particular type of coin. Most of these people came from places around the Roman Empire and so when they arrived they had to exchange their own money in order to pay the tax. That’s what the money-changers did. They provided the service so people could pay the temple tax. The

problem was that they charged a hefty fee to change it – a 6% fee off the top plus another 6% if you didn't have exact change.

There were also people selling animals for the sacrifices. They were theoretically permitted to bring their own, but the animals had to be without blemish and it was the priests – the same ones selling animals in the temple – who determined whether it was acceptable. Needless to say, it was safer to buy one already certified. Matthew mentions those who sold doves. People who couldn't afford a lamb to sacrifice were permitted to sacrifice a pair of doves. Again, the problem was that the cost of these animals at the temple was often five times the price outside. When Jesus saw the way the religious leaders were taking advantage of the people, it made him angry.

But what we have in both these stories is more than just Jesus getting angry. Jesus is actually carrying out his office of prophet. In the Old Testament we find that God had the prophets do some outrageous things in order to get the peoples' attention. For example, God had Ezekiel lay on his left side every day for 390 days and then on his right side for another 40. And he had to cook his meals over manure. It was a symbolic way of God pronouncing his judgment on Israel, symbolizing the coming destruction and exile. God had Hosea marry a prostitute and he had Jeremiah buy a clay pot and then smash it. We call these "sign-acts." They are like parables but they are acted out dramatically instead of in words.

Jesus is doing the same thing. He is acting out sign-acts, demonstrating God's displeasure with the religious leaders and the emptiness of their faith. In the temple he's displaying divine anger with the way things are being done. Jesus makes this clear when he says, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." The religious leaders had abandoned true worship in the temple in favor of commerce. Matthew reinforces the contrast between the religious leaders and Jesus by pointing out that the blind and lame came to

Jesus. They were not permitted in the temple because of their disabilities but Jesus healed them. This is the last time Jesus heals people in Matthew. However, instead of being amazed at the healing, the leaders are angry. And they are angry that the children are still singing praises to Jesus. Immediately we're reminded that Jesus said that we need the simple faith of children to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Next we come to the story of the fig tree. This is probably one of the most difficult passages in the Bible for a lot of people. What did that poor fig tree ever do to deserve this? Especially when we consider that Mark's gospel tells us it wasn't the season for figs. This was still early spring. It doesn't seem right for Jesus to curse the tree for not producing fruit out of season. The first clue comes in the fact that the tree had leaves. The type of figs that grew in Israel set fruit before the leaves came out. If a tree had leaves, it most likely had fruit. But this tree had leaves and no fruit. And the leaves were at the wrong time. So Jesus used this as an opportunity for a sign-act. The fig tree represents the religious leaders of the time who appeared on the outside to be very faithful. But their actions didn't line up with their words. They were like the fig tree with leaves but no fruit. The outward signs made people believe that they were fruitful but the reality was quite different.

Jesus curses the tree, saying, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" When Jesus says this the tree it withers and dies. Throughout the Old Testament, the fig tree is used as a symbol for the nation of Israel and as we saw in our reading from Jeremiah 8, the image of a fig tree dying is a symbol for God's judgment on them for their unfaithfulness.

It seems to me that we can learn a few things about our own faith from this passage. First, true religion, true faith in Christ means caring for the poor and the broken. These days our mail seems to be filled mostly with offers for credit cards and loans. Our shredder gets quite a workout. A couple of these have really caught my attention. The first one is for a loan of \$604. It's an actual

check. When you endorse the check you are agreeing to repay the loan according to the terms listed. What are those terms? The annual percentage interest rate is 99.83%. The second one is even worse. The APR on this one is listed as a range between 539 and 769%. Jesus got angry when his people were taken advantage of. I think 700% interest is one of the ways the poor are taken advantage of and I think as Christians we need to be finding ways to help.

Second, true faith results in fruit. If you and I are truly disciples of Christ, it will result in us worshipping God regularly, growing in our faith by studying the Bible, connecting with other Christians for fellowship, taking care of each other, serving people in need, and inviting people into a relationship with the risen Christ.

The lesson Jesus is trying to teach us with the fig tree is a warning against uselessness. James

1:22 tells us it's not enough to hear God's Word, we are to do what it says. The warning for us is that if we are not producing fruit we are in danger of withering and dying. Like the scribes and chief priests, we focus on the wrong things and forget about what's truly important. That's when our faith begins to wither and before long we're not engaged in the church any more.

Finally, Jesus is clear that true faith is primarily centered in prayer. The problem in the temple is that the buying and selling, the cheating of the people, prevented true prayer. So he tells his disciples that prayers made in faith will accomplish the impossible. My dream is that we would be known here as a house of prayer and that through our prayers and through our faith that God would do amazing things through us.

Amen.