

Scripture: Matthew 21:12-17

Message: These Hands Rearrange

April 14, 2019; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Palm Sunday

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It was an elaborate structure, a beautiful place of worship. Herod wanted to make a name for himself. He decided to leave a grand legacy of building projects so people would remember him for generations to come. The temple in Jerusalem was one of those projects.

It was the central place of worship for the Jews from all over the country as they gathered for special feast days. One of those major feast days was the Passover and thousands of people were in Jerusalem for the feast. The temple was a busy place.

But there were rules to obey in the temple. Important rules. Rules clearly defined and enforced by the religious leaders.

For example, the animals brought for sacrifice had to have no injuries or scars. There was a risk for people travelling a long distance that something might happen to their sacrificial animals along the way. Therefore, as a convenience to those coming from farther away, the animals for the sacrifice could be purchased after they arrived in Jerusalem. They might possibly be sold at a higher than usual cost, but there's a price for convenience.

Also, there was a specific temple tax that was required for the people to pay. But they were not allowed to use Roman currency to pay that tax. Roman currency had an image of the Roman emperor who was worshipped as an earthly god. The people who came from distant places where Roman currency was standard would require a currency exchange to pay the tax. This was conveniently set up in the Temple court. There might possibly be a slightly higher exchange rate, but it was all for a good cause.

The area used for selling animals and exchanging money was a larger outer plaza of the Temple area. It was identified as the Court of the Gentiles. Gentiles were welcome, even encouraged, to come to worship God, but they could not enter the central Temple area. Only Jews could enter the area that had a court for women, an area where men could bring sacrifices, and the central Holy of Holies.

If you have ever been to the Brockville Farmer's Market, you have probably found a respectable atmosphere of people milling around. The vendors have their designated areas, with price lists posted in some way. At the Market, you could probably find a quiet area to sit and observe or to read a book.

A Middle Eastern market is not usually as quiet and orderly. People are shouting to advertise what they are selling. Money-changers might be shouting out their rates to draw more customers. There would be the noise of the crowds milling about. All of this happening in the Court of the Gentiles.

But's that's OK, right? It's just the area for the Gentiles. They didn't really believe in God anyway. They didn't come to the Temple to worship anyway. Right?!

"I don't think so!" says Jesus. "Not here, you don't! That's not what this place is all about! Get out!! This is not a place for you to take advantage of people and make money. This is a place intended for worship of the one true God!"

Remember that this happened soon after Jesus entered Jerusalem very deliberately as a humble King. Jesus had intentionally set up a parade in a way that would bring to mind the words of the prophets. Jesus entered as a King, but he came riding on a donkey to show his humility.

Jesus welcomed the shouts of hosanna from the crowd. Jesus accepted the praises as the deliverer of the people, the Son of David who would rule on David's throne forever. He was the one who came in the name of the Lord. He was the one sent from God, the one whom the people were looking for, waiting for.

And he was a gentle, humble King. He did not come on a powerful war-horse, with an army of followers. He was King, but his kingdom was not a political kingdom of this world. It was the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to bring true peace, shalom, a peace not of this world, peace between God and sinners. Jesus came as the Prince of Peace.

Along with that message of being a humble King and Prince of Peace, Jesus also comes as a mighty judge. He is not only love; he is also justice. He desires what is right and true for those who seek after God. Making money is not be mixed with worship of God. Selling for profit must not impede others from worship. As judge he overthrows the tables of the merchants.

Jesus supports his action with a quote from two of Israel's greatest prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah. The house of God is to be a house of prayer. Prayer, in the Jewish context, is not just the single act of praying. It includes a broader meaning of worship of God. The focus of the activity in the temple as the house of God is to be on giving honour to God, expressing trust and praise to him, not on selfish profit.

As Jesus is catching his breath from throwing over the tables and proclaiming God's word from the prophets, he seems to turn around and sees the blind and lame coming to him. While he had no mercy for the money- hungry merchants, he has compassion for these weak and sick. He heals them.

These hands rearrange. They rearrange priorities in the temple area. Then these hands rearrange people's lives from sickness to health.

From cleansing the temple, Jesus turns to curing the blind and the lame. The humble King reaches to the hurting and sick to bring healing into their lives. Throughout his ministry, Jesus has shown that he fulfills God's promises as the coming Messiah. The Messiah would be one who heals the sick and brings sight to the blind. At this time when Jesus enters Jerusalem as King, he also claims his lordship over sickness. He expresses his kingdom rule as one of compassion and healing.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law are not impressed. They see Jesus' popular appeal. They see his miracles. They see his cleansing of the temple. They are indignant, enraged, seething with anger and jealousy. How *dare* Jesus claim the identity of Messiah. He was a carpenter from Nazareth. How *dare* Jesus cleanse the temple. He was just an ordinary citizen. *They* had authority over what went on in the temple. *They* set the rules. He can't just walk in and rearrange things.

But these religious leaders have their hands tied. They can't do anything to oppose Jesus because of the crowds. The people love what Jesus is doing. They are flocking to him and hang on his every action and word. Anyone who opposed Jesus now would be pounced on by the supportive crowd. They can't speak against his miracles.

Then they notice the children shouting. Finally these religious leaders have something they can legitimately complain about. Jesus may have sent out the merchants because what they were doing was improper for the temple area. Now Jesus better be consistent and send these children out. They were not showing the reverence due for worship in the temple. They were shouting. And they were kids. They had no place there.

Jesus disagrees. In fact, he encourages and approves of the children's praises. Jesus answers their 'Do you hear?' with his own 'Have you never read?' and leaves his opponents speechless. Jesus quotes Psalm 8 which begins with these words, " O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens." Then we

read, "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise."

The almighty, majestic God of heaven receives the praise of children as pleasing and acceptable. In fact, he has prepared this praise for himself to come from the lips of children.

This praise of the children is appropriate in that it confirms what Jesus has already revealed about himself. He is the Son of David, the Messiah. He is the one sent from God to do wonderful things in God's name. God has intended for these children to praise him as he really is. Rather than criticize or silence these children, it would be well to listen to them. They have learned their lessons well.

What does this story say to us today?

Is this a house of prayer and worship? Is that the priority of our hearts as we come to this place? Or do we come because "we have to"? Do we come merely to follow rules? Or to enforce rules?

Are there traditions and practices and rules that we hold dear in this place that get in the way of others coming to meet God in worship and prayer? Are there expectations that we have in place that hinder others from freely coming to meet with God?

Do we acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and King and seek to live out his humble, compassionate rule? Or do we seek power and authority and riches and profit as evidence of faithful, successful living?

Do we give money in the offering plate to earn God's favour or to buy his blessings? Or do we give our money and ourselves and our worship and our prayers because Jesus is Lord and because there is one true God whom we honour?

What are we teaching our children about Jesus? Can we learn from them, even as we also teach them the truths about God?

Do you trust the hands of Jesus to be at work to give hope in *your* troubles and sickness and pain?

These hands rearrange. They challenge us to look at our comfort zone and evaluate our priorities by the light of God's Word. These hands rearrange the comfortable status quo we have developed, that we may surrender to Jesus, the humble King, the Prince of Peace, the just Judge, the compassionate healer.

Will you be the hands of Jesus: to encourage others to focus on Jesus? To show compassion to others in need? To inspire praise to Jesus, our Saviour and King?

Amen.