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Turning the Tables On the Religious

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Text: Mark 11:12–21

Today we have two stories which are quite different and seem out of character for Jesus—and for Mark’s telling of the Jesus story—namely, “The Withered Fig Tree” and “Cleansing the Temple”. In most of the portraits of Jesus with which we are familiar we see a man who looks peaceful and kind; most of our gospel stories show him to be a man who is gentle and caring. But these two stories: what are they about? Are they contradictory to the other biblical passages? Do these two stories give us a different view of Jesus which challenges us to examine some of our pictures and conceptions of the man?

Let’s look at what was happening and what was in these two stories for the people of that day and now for us.

We have a very typical construction of the Gospel of Mark in these two stories: a very important story is surrounded by another story that is either told in two parts or told twice with several different details. Willard Swartley, in *Mark: The Way for All Nations*, says we should pay special attention to passages like this.¹

At Passover, Jews and Gentile proselytes from around the world come to Jerusalem. As some of you may remember, when we celebrate Passover we say, “And next year in Jerusalem”, at the end of the celebration and meal. There is nothing better than to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. But when we get there as Gentile proselytes, we find that we cannot worship. Our court is being used to sell temple coins, doves, and other sacrificial articles. Each Jew was to give two shekles at Passover and it had to be in temple currency... not Roman,

Egyptian, Persian, or wherever we came from. We have to exchange our money to pay this temple tax.

It is difficult enough to worship because many people are moving through our court to go to the Court of the Women, Court of the Israelites, and Court of the Levites/Priests. How can we worship with the traffic and the selling?

But to add insult to injury, they are not only selling and hawking these sacrificial items but they are charging phenomenal prices for them! They are making 100% or larger profits: some going to the sellers and much going to the temple on top of the two shekles.

Jesus and his disciples come onto this scene. He has over and over again throughout Mark's Gospel included the outsider. The Samaritan, women, poor folk, Gentiles, lepers, and others should have access to God, should be able to nurture their faith, and should be able to worship. They are acceptable and important people to Jesus, but not to the Israelite community. He has both preached and acted out their acceptance against religious opposition.

But now he comes to the temple which is the most important symbol of religion in Israel and Judah and finds that outsiders are not only excluded, they are not even allowed to worship! They do not have access to God! But Jesus knows that God wants to accept and love all people...the sinners and the righteous. The righteous have blocked God from the sinners. Sinners cannot pursue their faith journey.

Jesus is angry! So he begins turning over the tables, letting loose the doves, and exposing the hypocrisy and greed in this place of worship and holiness. He tosses over tables and repeats Isaiah 56:7, "My House will be called a house of prayer for all nations!" God is open to and wants to have a relationship with all peoples throughout the earth.

But the religious establishment has made this house of prayer for all nations into a bazaar, a "den of robbers" (which refers to Jeremiah 7:11). The people who want to worship and are discriminated against by the religious establishment are glad that someone has spoken out for them and exposed the hypocrisy and greed. The religious establishment is going to lose money and they must secretly plot to get rid of this man who has such insight and power!

This is the highest pitch in a battle which has simmered and gotten hotter and hotter throughout Mark. The Pharisees had a chance but in the contest with Jesus, things are getting rougher as he gains power and as they have to admit they have some practices which are not pure and helpful but actually detractions from God's will... and from Torah and Prophets.

When I saw *The Last Temptation of Christ*, I was very disappointed in this portion of the film. Jesus is in the basement talking with Judas Iscariot. He is upset and doesn't know what happened. But in my film, I would have Jesus standing firm like a prophet, a charismatic leader, a herald of truth. He was right and they knew that he was right. The people knew he was right. So they would have to get him in some devious way. It was Jesus' day; he was triumphant! All people now have access to God and can worship God in spirit and truth.

Jesus would not go to the basement. He would say, "We have now made this the court for all nations to worship God. Today you can all come to God and you will be heard." And there was a large AMEN corner shouting "Alleluia, Amen". They might have had another parade... except that they were here to worship.

The fig tree is a prediction of the temple culture. If it cannot serve the purposes of worship and of bringing people to faith in God, then it should be struck dead. In fact, on the day after it *is* dead; it will never bear fruit again. The story has just been retold in a metaphor.

These are sharp texts. Do we stand in some people's way to God by our customs and our traditions? I thought of two illustrations but you may think of more from your own experience or perhaps your own sense of exclusion from God's presence.

I am a strong proponent of inclusive language, not just in terms of non-sexist language but in terms of using many different terms and metaphors for God (and other theological ideas and concepts) so that all people can understand how God can fit into their lives. For example, we do need to see God not only as father but also as mother or as parent. Some people have not had caring fathers; some people have had violent fathers or ones who abused them. How can they see God as a loving, caring presence in their lives if we too often refer to God as father? We need to use other terms. A mother hen with her chicks, wind, friend, companion, light, etc. I myself

experienced new insight into God and was helped in my faith when we talked at seminary about wind and breath as ways of understanding God. In fact, these are ancient Hebrew concepts. God is with you and in you like breath; God is like wind—we can see the results but not the wind itself.

On the other hand, I have difficulty with king or shepherd, because I don't know what they do or what it takes to be one. Some of you may find meaning in these terms and I don't want to deny that. These terms may help you find the heart of God—or should I say the centre of God—in your life. But let us each give each other many more ways of coming to God with new words and words of our own experience. Then we can talk with one another about our faith journey. "Faith journey" is an important term for me. I can listen to others and hear their faith story, their life journey. They can tell me critical experiences and helpful insights. It's a good term for those of us here, people at House of Friendship, youth, my neighbour, an acquaintance at work. We can begin to talk about faith with a person from another religion because that person also has a faith journey into his/her journey to understand God.

A second example of how we block people's path into a deeper relationship with God is that we aren't explicit enough about what are the traditions and customs in this congregation. We want people to become members and friends, but they have to guess how we operate and guess at what is important. *NOW FIRST LET US SAY TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS CHANGE!* But we need to tell people what the expectations are. If someone doesn't understand or commits an error that another might find offensive, let us remember... they might not have known.

I find it difficult to worship in an Anglican, Catholic, or Lutheran service because I always get mixed up in their hymn and prayer book. Since I am with Lutheran interns, teaching at the Lutheran seminary this term, I often get into situations where we use their book (and I am getting better at it) but it hinders my worship. At a recent communion, one of the friendly professors came up and sat next to me. He helped me without making me child-like and the communion service was more meaningful. Otherwise I would have thought of what should I do next, rather than worship.

As we plan worship, we are conscious that all need to be able to worship. But we need constantly to ask how each person will experience this as worship even though we bring three different languages and traditions: Hmong, Spanish, and English Canadian. Can we help each other worship? Will we be one and is that not being the church of all nations as Jesus was crying for? Come and see if we accomplish a worshipful communion for all.

ARE WE AT FIRST MENNONITE CHURCH HELPING OTHERS TO FIND GOD or are we setting up road blocks to faith—taking advantage of others and making people pay a heavy price to come before God?

The fig tree and the cleansing of the temple ask us to examine our congregation and make sure that we are alive in God and are taking away the practices which hinder God's spirit among us.

Would Jesus need to cleanse part of our church? Or that part of us which blocks others rather than nurtures them in their faith journey?

Notes

- ¹ Willard Swartley, *Mark: The Way for All Nations* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1979/1981) 48ff.; 169-174.