Matthew 21:1-17
"Sacred Spaces"
April 17, 2011
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On Friday Heather and I took the day to celebrate her upcoming birthday. We did some shopping, had a nice lunch together, and just tried to have a real "day off" together (which is harder than it may sound). But the whole time we were walking around in celebration mode we kept noticing signs of darker things to come. Throughout the day the wind picked up steadily, and the temperature dropped. By the end of the afternoon there were dark clouds in the distance, and it was clear that a storm was coming. That night a terrible line of thunderstorms rolled through Charlotte. It was strange going from celebrating Heather's birthday to wondering if we'd soon be in the dark. Though I didn't realize it at the time, it was a fitting prelude to Holy Week.

That gradual movement from celebration to violent storm is one that we experience every year, beginning with Palm Sunday. Today we join with the crowds of people who hailed Jesus' entrance into the city of Jerusalem with loud cries of "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" We wave our palm branches in a festive celebration, and we rejoice… for our Savior

has come to us. *Add in the songs of children, and the celebration of baptism, and the reception of the confirmation class... and it's clear that this is a Sunday of celebration.* We have much to celebrate!

But we also know that there are dark clouds on the horizon. If we follow Jesus into Jerusalem, we'll quickly find ourselves in the midst of a terrible storm. Though we celebrate with the crowds around Jesus today, we know that when he goes to Jerusalem, he goes there to die. He will be arrested and crucified there. His disciples will deny him and flee from him. The storm is coming.

In our scripture reading from Matthew's gospel the dark clouds are gathering. Jesus first visits the temple, where he encounters merchants and moneychangers. In an angry confrontation he throws them out, accusing them of turning the temple into a robbers' den. Most Christians know this event as "the cleansing of the temple," which sounds a bit too sanitary if you think about it. It's actually more like the first rumble of thunder on a sunny day, the first blast of wind that shakes the trees and threatens to knock you off your feet.

Matthew's gospel makes it clear that you can't enter Jerusalem with Jesus on Palm Sunday without seeing the signs of

darker things to come. After Jesus "cleanses" the temple we still hear the little children shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Matthew means for us to connect the hosannas - the hosannas at the city gate lead to the hosannas at the temple doors. It's no accident that the first thing Jesus does when he enters Jerusalem is head straight for the temple, and that says something important about who Jesus is and what he's come to do. Who he is and what he's come to do is certainly something worth celebrating... but if we pay attention we'll also notice that it's just a bit unsettling.

At first we may feel like cheering for Jesus. When he turns over the tables of the merchants and moneychangers, it seems like he's giving the bad guys what they deserve. This Jesus is clearly no wimpy, sentimental Savior whose touchy-feely compassion drives everything he does. No, in fact this Jesus could be played in a movie by Chuck Norris! He's flexing his muscles, and tossing out movie star quality one-liners, and putting people in their place. This text teaches that you don't mess with Jesus, punk!

But you know, there's something a bit troubling about this scene, too, something that we'd rather not see too much of. Of all the events from Jesus' ministry that are portrayed in art, and

proclaimed in music, and rendered on stained-glass windows, the cleansing of the temple is not very popular. It could be that it's just a bit violent, and we don't really like to think of Jesus getting angry. But it also could be the realization that if Jesus cared so much about what people were doing in that temple, the center of worship in Jerusalem, enough to go in and tear the place apart, then he probably cares just as much (if not more) about what Christians today are doing in our centers of worship, our churches that bear his name, too. And if Jesus could get upset with what those moneychangers and merchants were doing in the name of God... well, who's to say he couldn't get just as upset with us? No church is a perfect church, and odds are that if Jesus entered any mainstream church today he'd turn over a table or two. That's more than just a little unsettling. Though we may feel like cheering Jesus during his rampage through the temple, the fact is that when Jesus brought his judgment to Jerusalem, he started with the house of worship, the sacred space. It suggests that God's reforming and refining and unsettling work begins with His people, and especially with where they gather.

So, I want to caution you against assuming that the merchants and moneychangers in the temple were just bad and greedy people who got what they deserved. To the contrary, they were conducting business as usual for that time and place. They fulfilled a necessary function, providing animals like doves for the temple sacrifices so that worshipers wouldn't have to worry about bringing their own, and converting money into temple money so that people could give to God without worrying about whether or not their coins were good enough. The thing that may have set Jesus off wasn't that they were there - in fact, they were right where they were supposed to be. Some suggest that Jesus was upset because they were set up right outside the temple, which is in fact where the majority of people would have gathered for worship. The temple proper was reserved for the priests and temple leaders. Everyone else had to stay outside, and as a result that's where they worshiped. Maybe Jesus was upset that the merchants and moneychangers were doing business in the only place where all the common folk could come and worship. That's somewhat plausible. I could see Jesus getting upset about that.

But you know, I'm convinced that the problem that Jesus had with the temple that day had more to do with who *wasn't* there. You had the priests inside where nobody else could go. You had the merchants and moneychangers outside the doors, doing necessary business. You had your average, everyday worshiper outside the temple with their dove and their temple money so that they could worship God properly. When Jesus went to the temple, he saw everybody doing what they always did, just as they had for years. What he didn't see was the people who needed to experience God's presence the most. The blind, the lame, the children... these are the people who come to Jesus in the temple after he "cleanses" it. They are the ones who are forgotten and overlooked in all the usual temple affairs. They have no doves, no money, no ability to buy or sell or worship in the customary way... and yet, in the eyes of Jesus these are the very people whom the temple should care for the most! *The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. And the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'.* Hosanna, indeed!

Well-known pastor Fred Craddock had this to say about it:

"You know why I think [Jesus cleansed the temple]?...Let me tell you. I think what happened to the temple is the same thing that happens to all good, fine, well-meaning institutions... They can get fixed and hardened in place and lose their original purpose. It can happen to a temple. It can happen to a church. It can happen to a school. It can happen to a government. [It] starts out serving the needs of people, meeting the needs of people, and something happens in the course of time and now the people are serving [it]. And you never remember what day it was that it happened. It just drifted into it and somebody has to come along and say, 'Now what's the point again?'"[1]

Understand that Jesus was not opposed to sacred space or sacred things. The point of Jesus cleansing the temple was not that the temple was bad or that the people in it and around it were bad. No, the point was that the temple is sacred space only insofar as it is used to care for the sacred, and nothing is more sacred to God than another human being. All those blind and lame people who weren't even within shouting distance of the temple? They were sacred to God. All of those children who were overlooked and

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[1] "We Are God's Temple," *A Fred Craddock Collection* (Bell Tower Productions, 2001).

unnoticed by the temple leaders? They were sacred to God. All of those around us in the community of Mint Hill who have never heard of us or been greeted by us or cared for by us? They are sacred to God. This church, the one in which we now worship God, *is* sacred space only insofar as it is used to care for them.

I once heard a parable that compared the church to a little lifesaving station built beside a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occurred. The work done at that station affected countless lives, and some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding areas, wanted to give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. So they bought new boats and they trained new crews. They bought new furnishings and enlarged the building. Over time it became a very nice place to gather, but it also became a sort of club with lots of members. As the years passed, fewer and fewer of the members were interested in going into the sea on lifesaving missions and they paid more and more attention to the programs and activities that served the members themselves. Eventually they forgot why the station had existed in the first place, and those whose ships wrecked off the coast were mostly ignored and left to drown.

We as Christians must never forget our true purpose, and this Palm Sunday is a perfect time to be reminded of why this space we all share is sacred in the first place. Today we are reminded that we follow Jesus into Jerusalem, into the storm, where he will be arrested and crucified. And he will do it for the sake of all those who cry out, "Hosanna!" - *Save us, Lord!* That's you and that's me, but it's also those surrounding this house of worship who have been forgotten or overlooked. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday ultimately points toward his death on the cross on Good Friday, which was not just for the sake of those inside the temple, but those who were outside as well.

There is a storm coming. But as is the case with all storms, we look forward to that moment when the sun breaks through the clouds, and the darkness gives way to the light, and as the birds begin to sing after the rain has passed, we will take our place among the blind, and the lame, and all the children of God, and marvel at what amazing things our God has done.

Thanks be to God. Amen.