

**Jeremiah 7:1-15**

**Mark 11:12-25**

**April 2, 2017**

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

***Journey to the Cross***

**JESUS AND THE WORSHIP WARS**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

“Worship wars” is the term used to describe the struggle churches find themselves in when they attempt to make changes in the style and content of Sunday worship. The stereotypical criticisms from each side can sound like this: “Contemporary worship is just a series of endless praise choruses with shallow theology” vs. “Traditional worship is dry and archaic, with songs written by a bunch of dead men from the 1800’s.” As a result, congregations might end up having two separate services — an early “contemporary” service (which is often relegated to the Fellowship Hall) and a “traditional” service in the sanctuary. Some congregations try to offer a “blended” service, combing the “contemporary” and “traditional.”

Changes in worship style have often led to the criticism of “Burger King worship” — “Have it your way!” Let’s think about that, for a minute. If we can step back from the “worship wars” and be honest, all kinds of worship run the risk of being “Burger King worship.” In other words, we should pay close attention to why we come to worship and what exactly our worship leads us to do and how our worship leads us to live.

It’s common to hear people say, “I got a lot out of that worship service today.” Or they might say, “I got my tank filled up. I got recharged. It made my week complete.

It got me ready for the coming week.” There’s nothing particularly wrong with those sentiments — except, of course, it might suggest that sometimes “I didn’t get a whole lot out of that worship service.”

Instead of asking, “What did you get out of today’s worship service?” the better question is, “What did you put into today’s worship service?” “What did you get out of today’s worship service?” suggests you are here for the show, no different really from the audience at Thalian Hall or at the Regal Mayfaire Cinema in Wilmington. Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish Christian writer, suggested that we have it all wrong when we ask “What did you get out of the worship service?” He said we too often think of worship as entertainment, which makes me the emcee or star actor, with Karla and Vera and the choir in supporting roles, and you the passive audience. Instead, Kierkegaard suggested that you, the congregation, are the main actors, with me, Karla, Vera, and the choir serving as your coaches and prompters, helping you and urging you to offer your best to God, who is the true audience of our worship.

Over the years, I have heard horror stories about “worship wars” — divided congregations, church splits, ministers getting run off. But I have never heard of a col-

league who was handed over to the elders to be killed because of the “worship wars.” But Jesus was!

In her article in *Christianity Today* called “What is true worship?” Delesslynn Kennebrew writes about “the priority of worship.” She says, “Worship is not the slow song that the choir sings. Worship is not the amount you place in the offering basket. Worship is not volunteering in children’s church. Yes, these may be acts or expressions of worship, but they do not define what true worship really is. . . one [definition] encapsulates the priority we should give to worship as a spiritual discipline: *Worship is to honor with extravagant love and extreme submission.* True worship, in other words, is defined by the priority we place on *who* God is in our lives and *where* God is on our list of priorities. **True worship is a matter of heart expressed through a lifestyle of holiness.** (emphasis added) We worship God because he is God. . . Our extravagant love and extreme submission to the Holy One flows out of the reality that God loved us *first*.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, we come to worship God because of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. If we get something **out of** worship, let us hope we get the inspiration and the strength and the promise we need to do what God asks us to do “through a lifestyle of holiness.”

The Alternative Sunday School class just recently finished an extended study of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, from Daniel - Malachi. About two-thirds of the way through our study, I half-jokingly told the class, “I thought about just coming in here today and saying, ‘Remember what we talked about last week? It’s the same this week!’” That’s because the #1 common theme that runs through those prophets’ messages is that obedience to and the right worship of God must lead to justice and a certain way of living as God’s people.

\* In Isaiah 58, the people ask, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” God answers, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

\* In Amos 5, the Lord says, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” He tells them to take away their burnt offerings and their noisy songs, “but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

\* In Micah 6, the worshiper asks, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?” Burnt offerings? Thousands of rams or ten thousands of rivers of oil? Even my firstborn? The prophet answers, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

The danger, of course, is to use our worship (even “going to church”) as a safety net, as Jeremiah accused God’s people of doing: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not

known, and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!' — only to go on doing all these abominations?"

Today's gospel story from Mark is full of religious ritual and piety and customs and preparations for worship. The story takes place at the beginning of the Passover Festival, one of the two greatest Jewish religious festivals. Faithful Jews (and even Gentiles) streamed into Jerusalem and to the temple to remember and celebrate how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land.

On Sunday evening of that last week of Jesus' life, Mark tells us, "he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." (Mark 11:11) On Monday morning, Jesus and the twelve hit the road again for Jerusalem. When he got to the temple, he turned the tables on the moneychangers and the dove sellers. It's tempting to think, "They must have been cheating the people with high service fees or blemished animals." But Mark doesn't say a word about that. Actually, these were helpful and needed services for pilgrims who had traveled a long way, who didn't have the right kinds of coins to pay the temple tax or acceptable animals for the necessary sacrifices.

Is that really Jesus' beef in the temple? Maybe it goes much deeper than that. When Jesus quotes from the Old Testament prophets, we get a clue as to the *real* problem — "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" (Jer. 7:11) The "den of robbers" is not where they do their robbing. It's where they hide out for safety *after* doing their robbing. Jesus is saying to all the people there the same thing Jeremiah said to God's people in the temple: "You go out and break all of the commandments and don't live like God's people, and then you come back here to God's house and think you're safe!"

A few weeks ago we heard about "the heart of Mark's gospel," when Peter confessed to Jesus, "You are the Messiah." Since then, we have heard Jesus teach his disciples three times about the suffering and death waiting for him in Jerusalem. It has been said that this scene in the temple is perhaps the most important single event in Mark, apart from the Crucifixion, because it sets in motion the authorities' plot to kill Jesus.

But why? Why, when the chief priests and scribes hear Jesus in the temple that Monday of Holy Week, did they keep looking for a way to kill him? Imagine if somebody came into our Easter worship service two weeks from today and tipped over the handbell tables, pushed over the marble baptismal font, and tore down the pulpit cloths. Even if he didn't say a word, the message would be loud and clear — "You're doing it all wrong!" What kind of reception do you think our Easter visitor would get?

Jesus, the worship warrior, walks into the middle of the "ritual observers and ceremony makers" in the temple at festival time. He preaches about and acts out his message about the direct connection between our worship of God and our actions as God's people. In our contemporary worship wars, music directors, worship leaders,

ministers, worship committees, even entire congregations can be victims. But Jesus really was a victim of the worship war there in the temple, in the ultimate sense.

The “whole crowd was spell bound by his teaching,” but the religious leaders weren’t too happy with him. This is where Mark’s gospel has been leading us for the last five weeks, as Jesus has talked about his coming death in Jerusalem. But who would have ever thought that the straw that broke the camel’s back would be Jesus teaching about how to worship and the true purpose of worship and what effect true worship should have on God’s people? In church, of all places! In a gospel full of irony, how ironic is it that the death of the Son of God/Messiah is set in motion because he teaches/shows God’s people about the true purpose of worship by exposing what they are actually doing?

This story about Jesus cleansing the temple is sandwiched between a two-part story about a hapless fig tree. Let’s just put the cards on the table — do you feel sorry for the fig tree that got cursed and withered? After all, Mark plainly says, “for it was not the season for figs.” (v. 13) Let’s not chase down that rabbit hole! The fig tree story helps us understand the temple story, and vice versa. Think of the fig tree story as a parable, a sign . . .

Jesus was hungry and saw a fig tree full of leaves. It was a promising sign along the road, but the tree was barren. It didn’t live up to its promise.

Jesus saw a temple up ahead, full of pomp and tradition and piety and custom and promise. It was a promising sign at the end of the road, but the temple was barren. The people in the temple didn’t live up to God’s expectations of them.

The barrenness of the fig tree by the side of the road is a sign of the spiritual barrenness of the religious leaders and the people who cannot and will not recognize the Messiah who has come to them and who shows them what true worship really is. God’s people have not borne the fruit expected by God. As one writer puts it, “There is nothing abnormal about the tree; it is just doing its usual thing. There is nothing abnormal about the Temple; it is just doing its usual thing. But unlike a fig tree, there is no ‘season’ for justice. Justice is always in season. The Temple has leaves (people worshipping) but no fruit (people doing justice). And Jesus shuts it down in a way that is paralleled by his actions with the fig tree.”<sup>2</sup>

As we get close to Holy Week, one of the high, holy times in our church (especially Good Friday and Easter Sunday), our church will have plenty of leaves. We will have all of the rituals and traditions and customs and liturgies to help us remember the cross on Calvary and the empty tomb in the garden. The question is, will our worship bear fruit?

A month ago we had a covered dish luncheon and mission program in the Fellowship Hall. Around the tables, we asked, “What is our why?” Throughout this year, I am using a graphic on our session meeting information that says, “You must define your **why** before you can begin with the **what** and the **how**.” That Sunday afternoon one person said, “Our why is because God loved us first!” That’s right — and that leads us to our what (worshiping) and our how (our traditions and ways of worshiping).

We can't forget our why because, as someone has said, "Treating worship as a means [to or for anything else other than glorifying God] leaves our worship as barren as a fig tree." It's true — sometimes our busy, prosperous churches can be like leafy, fruitless fig trees. And the same can be said of our busy, prosperous lives . . .

The season for figs in North Carolina is August - October. It's disappointing when you can't get fresh figs (and, therefore, fresh fig preserves). What if we only bear fruit "in season," in other words, only when it suits us and our needs or is convenient or not too costly? 2 Timothy 4:2 says, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent in season or out . . ." We might say the same thing about our worship of God and our Christian lives. Let us be persistent in season or out, and bear the kind of good fruit that is characteristic of the true worship of our God who has sent us his salvation in his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

***Let us pray: O God, as we hear your call to worship you in spirit and in truth, and as we come to our Lord's table this morning, help us to be rightly prepared to receive the sacrament. Take away any unbelief and overcome any doubts that we may have. Give us believing hearts that we may hear the words, "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," and live to your service and always for your glory. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Delesslyn A. Kennebrew, "What is true worship?" in "Christian Bible Studies: Transformed by the Truth" at [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com).

<sup>2</sup>David Ewart, "Mark 11:12-25, Jesus' Last Week — Monday," at [www.holytextures.com](http://www.holytextures.com).