

## **The Last Week - 2/28/10 – Jeremiah 7:1-11; Mark 11:12-19 – Serving God’s Purpose**

I want to hold before you the two images in our gospel reading: a fig tree and the Jewish temple. What do you suppose is Mark’s purpose for placing them side by side? Let’s begin by asking what the purpose of the fig tree is? The answer is simple enough: to produce figs. The text indicates that it’s out of season. So it’s not too surprising that there is no fruit on the tree. Yet Jesus is hungry and he looks to the tree for sustenance. It’s not serving its purpose, so it might as well be dead. He pronounces judgment on the tree, and it dies.

Now let’s look at the purpose of the temple. The temple was thought to be the place where God’s presence dwelled. When people entered the temple, they were standing on holy ground. Because God was holy and humans were not, sacrifices were offered to atone for their sins. It was an outward sign of an inner action, much like we do when we begin worship with confession. People were sorry for taking God’s goodness for granted, for living contrary to God’s intent as expressed in the Torah or Law. Coming to the temple and offering sacrifice was a means of being cleansed, forgiven, and made new. The hoped for outcome was much more than appeasing God. The intent was to turn one’s life around and be so inspired and grateful to God that one would leave the temple renewed and committed to living God’s way. The heart of God’s way is showing love for God by loving one’s neighbor. At the heart of the Law and the temple, and the intent of worship, is to lead us to work for a just society. We are bearers of God’s presence and kingdom. This was not happening in the temple. Like the fig tree, it was not serving its purpose or bearing fruit. It needed change.

In Jeremiah 7, God tells the prophet to stand in front of the temple and confront those who enter about their false sense of security. They were taking for granted that God’s presence in the temple guaranteed the security of Jerusalem and their own security as well. There was no cause and effect between worship and how they lived, what they thought, and how they treated others. “Do you think that divine worship excuses you from divine justice?” God charges through Jeremiah. “Do you think all God wants is regular attendance at the temple rather than equitable distribution of God’s land?” The phrase “den of robbers” has nothing to do with temple practices or their religious system. Rather, it refers to the everyday injustices that “steal” from God’s dream for the world. This is what makes them robbers. They think the temple is their safe house, a den or place of security. The temple is not the place where the robbery occurs, but the place the robbers go for refuge. They use the temple and their religion to justify their actions. Jeremiah and Jesus stood in the ancient prophetic tradition in which God insisted not on justice and worship, but on justice over worship. Since God is just and the world belongs to God, worship cannot be separated from justice. Worship joins us with God, fills us with God’s Spirit, empowers and sends us into the world to do God’s work of creating a just and equitable society.

When Jesus overturns the tables and drives the moneychangers out, he isn’t condemning the buying and selling of sacrificial animals. Rather, he is demonstrating in a graphic way that those operating the temple have settled for something far less than true worship. They are using the temple to pad their pockets rather than feed the hungry or lessen the burden of the poor. What would happen if someone would disrupt our worship, turn off the lights, shut off the heat, and tell us we can’t worship again until our everyday lives reflect God’s justice? Is 11:00 or whatever hour we worship the most segregated hour of the week? If so, then something is not right.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done. Do we really mean that, especially if that’s going to change the way we think, relate, and act? What’s the connection between these words and our actions? God wants to partner with us to bring in the kingdom. So we pray that God would give “us,” that is, “everyone” daily bread, or the basic necessities of life. Are we ready to share from our abundance so that everyone has enough? That’s why we support the Global Barnyard, participate in the Angel tree and Operation Shoe Box, engage in a Hispanic ministry like La Vela, serve meals to the homeless, resettle refugees, and purchase third world coffee and chocolate. A just and more equitable world is our response to worship. Another mark of the kingdom is forgiveness. “How many times must I forgive?” Peter asks Jesus. “There is no limit,” Jesus says. Are we ready to forgive like that and be agents of reconciliation in a broken and hostile world? Daily bread and forgiveness are outgrowths or the end results of worship. Transformed lives transform the world. Our deep love for God leads us to give our hearts and hands to doing God’s work.

Our Lenten journey is a time for cleansing the temple of our lives. It is a time for recapturing the true intent of worship, which is to work with God in creating a just world. The church is not a place for us to hide or justify what we do. Rather, it is a place where we are purified as we confess our shortcomings, and then, knowing we are forgiven and loved, serve our God by using our hands to create a more just and equitable world.