Date: February 28, 2021 (Lent II)

Text: Mark 11. 12 - 19

Title: “Clearing the Temple”

**Intro -**

 relate per “the fig tree”. - an odd little bit of the Gospels…

 almost as if Jesus had a bit of a melt-down

 (he *was* under a lot of stress - with the whole journey to the cross

 going on…)

 cf. - how are we to make sense of this…?

 it seems so out of place… so out of character…

 relate as an “enacted parable”

 a physical form of teaching that condemns:

 - promise… without fulfillment

 - profession… without practice

 i.e. - seeing the leaves on the tree gives every indication that there

 should be fruit, but…

 the tree “professes” to offer fruit, but…

 overall - there is a disconnect between what is seen…

 what is promised / professed…

 and - what is actually there

 i.e. - a fitting lead-in to the cleansing of Temple -

 which had fallen far in how it functioned…

 fallen far in the purpose it served…

 overall - a difficult text in its original setting…

 a challenging passage in ours -

 - how does it serve to guide us on the Way of the Cross…?

**I) A Brief History of T(ime)emple**

 the history of the temple followed a distressing trajectory…

 It began idealistically when Solomon built it at God's behest -

 marking the permanent dwelling place of God among his chosen people. note - Solomon’s temple was designed to remind people of

 the Garden of Eden -- the place where God and humans

 once dwelt face to face,

 and it was there that the priests offered sacrifices to God

 for the forgiveness of sin.

 The temple was the "navel of the earth," or the center point of all creation.

 It represented the best of the covenant enterprise between

 God and God's people…

 - it was the focal point for the life of a nation

 unfortunately - it went downhill from there…

 Israel became overly focused on her own special standing with God…

 her own unique place in the cosmos, such that -

 the people began to believe they could do whatever they wanted

 so - they added to what God had given them…

 they shunned the one God… and reached out toward other

 deities in the form of idol worship

 their undisciplined pursuit of “more…”

 and a failure to recognize the warning signs of apostasy

 led to major fractures in society,

 and eventually resulted in God exiling his people

 at the hands of foreign invaders -

 who destroyed the Temple, and carried off its treasures

 - when they were allowed to return, they rebuilt the temple,

 but it was never what it once was.

 Even when Herod the Great undertook the project of restoring and

 expanding the temple mount, it was really more of a vanity project

 than a real religious undertaking

 such that…

 by the time Jesus walked up to the temple that day…

 it was but a shell of its former glory and mission

**II) Business Is Booming**

 … which is not to say that “business was not booming”

 it’s just that - instead of being a holy place

 (what should have been its core identity and function…)

 the temple had become a shopping mall… a bank…

 a government building… and a revolutionary symbol

 all wrapped up in one

 every interest group saw the temple as a symbol of salvation, but…

 none of what they used it for would save it, or - the people.

 cf. - particularly problematic here was the plight this posed to the people…

 The sacrificial system in the temple had evolved, over the centuries,

 into an efficient machine for fleecing rich and poor alike,

 earning a great deal of money for the insiders who ran it.

 If you went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, your goal was to sacrifice an animal, according to the law of Moses.

 You could bring your own sacrificial animal, of course,

 but many who had journeyed from afar found it easier to purchase

 a beast locally - at a steep markup.

 `The law said you had to present a perfect animal, without mark or blemish. Unless you purchased a pre-approved animal within the temple precincts, you had to bring your offering before an inspector,

 who would tell you whether or not it met the grade.

 The inspectors were in cahoots with the animal-sellers,

 who knew how to grease their palms with silver.

 Rarely did they grant approval for a sacrificial animal brought in from the outside.

 And then - if you had journeyed from one of the lands of the Jewish diaspora -- Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, even distant Rome —

 the coins jingling in your purse would have been imperial coins,

 engraved with the Emperor's likeness.

 Such graven images violated the Second Commandment,

 and so were forbidden within the temple precincts.

 In order to buy yourself a sacrificial animal, you had to first exchange

 your Roman money for image-free Judean coins.

 The money changers, who had a monopoly, charged exorbitant commissions, but the poor pilgrims had no recourse.

 (cf. - probably even worse than at JFK…)

 but - the reason Jesus raged through the temple had nothing to do with

 the proximity of money to a place of worship,

 as some modern commentators have assumed.

 His anger was sparked by injustice:

 the fact that the temple had been transformed into a corrupt machine

 for cheating pilgrims out of their life savings.

 and so Jesus comes to provide a wake-up call…

 to take charge…

 to offer a stark reminder that any institution that claims

 to be of God…

 is doomed to failure if it refuses to pay attention to

 God’s own core purposes and values

 note - by the time Mark wrote his Gospel -

 the Romans were on the verge of destroying the Temple -

 turning it into little more than a smoking crater

 - a painful visual to go along with this reminder…

 to accompany this warning…

**III) Jesus Takes Charge**

 So Jesus walks in and drives out the sellers…

 … which effectively shuts down the temple’s sacrificial system

 (i.e. - a bit of big “to-do”)

 but -

 a “to-do” that presages what Jesus *came* to do:

 - make the sacrificial system obsolete…

 - open up access to God… to all people…

 - to effectively get rid of the temple, but -

 raise up a new one…

 be the embodiment of God as the Word made flesh…

 representing the very presence of God with his people…

 (especially those who were outside the bounds of

 the temple establishment…)

 cf. - Jesus would do…

 Jesus would accomplish…

 what the temple could not

 he came with humility… (instead of pride)

 he gave himself away… (instead of pursuing power)

 he showed that the way to life…

 was by self-sacrifice -

 as opposed to the wide road the temple had come to be

 (which led straight off a cliff…)

 so…

 how does this guide us on the way of the Cross…?

 cf. - as it challenges us to look within…

 and determine if - as should have been the case

 with the temple -

 if - we are being faithful to our call…

 faithful to our identity and to our purpose

 the temple (not that the temple itself had anything to do with it, but…

 those who administered it…)

 the temple and its stewards got sidetracked…

 and failed in this

 - do we understand… accept… and - embrace

 who Jesus was and what Jesus came to do?

 - have we added anything to the central purpose of Jesus’ ministry…

 the self-giving nature of what he achieved on the cross…

 what he offers to each of us…?

 - have we taken anything away from Jesus (that we might find challenging or

 makes us uncomfortable…)?

 relate -

 what it boils down to here = do we have a spirit of defeat, or…

 a spirit of hope?

 and… how do we show it?

 (key - it’s not rocket science…)

 cf. - per: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, pioneer psychologist of death and dying,

 tells the story of one ordinary person who sowed hope everywhere

 she went, just by telling her story.

 Dr. Ross was visiting terminally-ill patients in a hospital, interviewing them and noting their outlook on life. One ward in particular seemed filled with patients who were relentlessly sunny, upbeat, positive about

 their condition -- even though their medical prognoses

 were no better than anyone else’s.

 After investigation, Kübler-Ross managed to identify the single

 common denominator… the one factor those hopeful patients shared…

 - It was one particular cleaning woman.

 "What are you doing with my patients?" Kübler-Ross asked,

 once she'd caught up with her.

 Initially the woman was hesitant to answer.

 She was sure she'd done something wrong.

 but after the doctor reassured her, she revealed that she took extra time to

 sit with the patients and hold their hands.

 Often, she shared with them the story of how she had held her own dying child on her lap,

 and how death no longer held any fear for her.

 "You see, doctor," she explained, "the dying patients are just like

 old acquaintances to me, and I'm not afraid to touch them,

 to talk with them, to offer them hope.”

 because…

 she knew her call…

 she was comfortable with her identity…

 she was - by Christ’s gift - a child of God

 may we journey on the Way of the Cross…

 … with this goal in mind, because -

 this is where God would lead us