

Wake-up Call

By: Penny Holste

March 11, 2012. Pastor Penny preaches on the story in John of Jesus turning over the tables in the temple. The gospel is a warning. It's a wake-up call from God to help us take account of our lives, especially our time.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, Greta loved going to church on Easter Sunday. She loved the Easter egg hunt and the Easter brunch and the Easter lilies. But she also loved sitting there with everybody singing those happy songs, and hearing the trumpet in the background. There was just one thing that Greta didn't like about Easter, and that was her mother was never there. Her mother was always home making Easter dinner. Greta's mother was a consummate cook, and the Easter dinner was her centerpiece — and she invited lots of friends and relatives to it. And it was a wonderful ham dinner with a cross-shaped cake for dessert, presented on a round mirror. And Greta always saw her mother presiding over the meals, sitting at the end of the table, glowing as the compliments would continue coming. But then one year on Good Friday, a wind storm came through her neighborhood and they lost their electricity for a few days. So, Easter dinner had to be canceled at their house. So that Easter Greta's mother came to church, and sat next to her of course. And as everyone was singing those hymns Greta was just beaming, because it was wonderful to hear her mother's lovely soprano voice joining in. And she looked up and smiled at her mother, and she thought to herself that her mother shared her joy in being there. And truly she did, because her mother was always there, every Easter, from that time on.

Now in contrast to that happy story, we have a rather stark gospel lesson. Jesus is violent. Our Jesus, our peacemaker, is violent! First, we see him perform his only negative miracle: he curses a fig tree and it withers. And then he gets involved in a chaotic scene, an angry scene in the temple, at the height of Passover. Now, the cursing of the fig tree we understand a little more when we know that the fig tree was a symbol in the Old Testament for the children of Israel. And scholars tell us that what Jesus was doing was performing a parable. He was warning his disciples that there was something desperately wrong with the spiritual health (or lack of it) with the kingdom of Israel. And it was dangerous, and they would be cursed for it. And what was wrong with them would clearly be seen in the next event, when Jesus walked into this crowded temple — ten times as many people as normal (we're in Jerusalem at Passover) — and began throwing furniture around. I mean, you can imagine the sound of knocking down wooden tables on the stone pavement, and the crashing and the money being flown around, and the animals: the sheep and the cows that were there to be purchased for a burnt offering, the sounds in this chaos.

And Jesus must have had a terrible look on his face. His eyes must have been flashing with anger, because people did what he said and he cleared the place out. But it's so unlike Jesus, and we have to ask: why now? Jesus saw many injustices, and he was troubled by them and sometimes spoke harshly — but never, never throwing furniture around. Well, he was witnessing the desecration of his Father's house — the temple, the meeting place of God and human beings — where there was a holy of holies, containing the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments. This was God's house. And he watched as people desecrated it in three different ways.

First of all, they brought the smells and the sounds of the marketplace into the temple itself. And he said not only that, but secondly they were cheating the people as they did it. Those who were changing the money from the foreign coinage to the Jewish half shekel, and those who were selling the animals for a burnt offering, were cheating people. He said: you are making my Father's house into a den of thieves. But the third way they were desecrating the house of God — and maybe it's the saddest — is that they carried on this buying and selling in the only place where Gentiles were allowed to worship. It was the court of the Gentiles, and those people who believed in the Jewish god but weren't of Jewish background were allowed there and there only. They had taken it over — in other words, pushing these people out so that they couldn't worship at all.

And Jesus' quotes Isaiah, where we hear God describing God's plan for the temple as it's being rebuilt 500 years earlier. God said: I want my house to be a place of prayer for all Nations. I want everyone, from all backgrounds, to be able to come and be part of my family. And so, because of the selfishness of the sellers and the money changers, and the leaders who allowed it and encouraged it because of their selfishness, because of their greed for money, they had turned God's dream for the temple into a nightmare.

Now this didn't happen all at once. For hundreds of years this selling of animals and the exchange of money had been going on, and it was an important part of being able to worship on the Passover. It hadn't, however, gone on in the temple. But slowly, people began to be greedy. And they began to be selfish about what they did. And the leaders allowed it and encouraged it. But I'm sure it took a while to get to that point, and that's the scary thing: because we all know how easily we can make subtle changes for the worse.

We can head to the store to buy one thing, one thing that we really need, and end up buying a lot of things we don't need. But it just happens a little bit at a time. You see one thing and well, that would go and that would go, and pretty soon you have a lot of things you had never intended to buy. Well, you know our banks will tell us when we've come to the wall on that one. We can't keep doing that. But time is a whole different thing. We can squander our time little by little, and no one calls us into account. I think that probably for many of us, we are like Greta's mother. We want to be good and perfect. We want to do things well. We appreciate success and the feeling it gives us, and the admiration of other people. And so we throw ourselves into what we're doing, whether it's our work or our school work or an athletic endeavor or even a hobby. We say well, if I do a little more, well then I can do it perfectly. If I take on a little more responsibility at work, then I will be more successful. Then I'll have a little more clout, a little more power, a little more prestige, I'll feel better about myself. Or if I write one more paper for extra credit, my grade point will improve a little more and it'll be perfect. Or if I get up earlier and do 20 more minutes of warm ups, I will be much better in my sport. And little by little, we squander our time. We take it all for ourselves so that there's not enough time left over for our family, for our friends, or for God. We're too tired at the end of the day for a time of prayer. We're too weary at the beginning of the week to be in church.

And what Jesus is saying in this dramatic and vehement action in the temple is that it's dangerous. He's warning us that we are on the verge of giving away nothing less than our relationship with God. Giving away that experience of God's love, and forgiveness, and guidance, and healing, and the joy of repaying God by worship. That's what's at stake.

Well our gospel isn't all bad news. There is hope. First, there's hope because we know that the very Jesus whose eyes flashed in anger continued on Holy Week, to the cross, where he died for the very people that were desecrating his Father's house — those people who, after his demonstration, began to

plot to kill him. For those people and for us, he was willing to die to forgive our sins, and to give us power to change. He said: see that mountain that the temple is built on? If you believe and pray, God can even change that. In other words, God can take the biggest barrier in our life and help us reform it or change it, or even replace it.

An example: I was with some pastors from Kansas City this last week, and they talked about some of their parishioners who were frustrated, because their sons were involved in hockey and all the practices and the games and the tournaments were on Sunday morning, and they never made it to church. They decided to change that. So they partnered with local clergy, who provided a worship service on the rink. There in the arena, in between games, they would gather for a time of prayer and singing and a short message. And the result they hadn't counted on was that it was a witness to all the other families who weren't involved with church, who saw them being that passionate about their faith, and who were then invited to join.

Our gospel today is a warning. It's a wake-up call from God to help us take account of our lives, especially our time. To evaluate it, to open our hearts and let God tell us what God thinks of what we do — so that we, through the power of God, cannot be the tree that withers, but the tree that is fruitful and healthy and that bears the fruit of love, for our families and our friends, for our community. And especially for God, the one who loved us enough to die for us, to make us part of his family.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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