

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
First Sunday in Lent, February 26, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 140, 146:1, 323, 398, 146:2-3.

Lessons: Jeremiah 7:1-11, 1 John 1:5-2:2, Passion History, Part 1.

Sermon Text: Matthew 21: 12-17.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

NOTE: The Passion History is found on the LCCF website on the WEEKLY SERMON page.
<http://www.lutheranlccf.org/MinistrybyMail.html>

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Very early in Jesus public ministry, *“When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!’ His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”* John 2:13-17 (NIV)

As Jesus came to the temple at the beginning of the last week of his life, the temple in Jerusalem had again become a place of business, of merchandising. Merchants in the temple courts set up shop and made money off those who came to worship God. Instead of a place of prayer-the temple became a market. How could troubled souls find peace in that noise? How could someone who bore a heavy burden concentrate on prayer with the sounds of bartering and noisy animals in the temple courts? It is no wonder that Jesus would want the temple and its courts to be a place of worship and prayer.

Our worship services should help us focus on what is essential in our worship – Jesus. Perhaps we must ask ourselves some important questions too. Have we let the sounds and the noise of everyday living so occupy our minds and hearts that we don’t take time for prayer and God’s Word? Do our lives and hearts need a good cleansing? Let Jesus speak to our hearts today. He will call us to repentance. As we see him in the temple, we learn that

JESUS CLEANSSES THE TEMPLE

- 1. So it can be a place of prayer for all.**
- 2. So it can be a place where childlike faith grows.**

The temple in Jesus’ day was a beautiful building. It wasn’t the same temple Solomon built, but it was constructed for the same reasons. Solomon stated the purpose of God’s temple beautifully in his prayer of dedication: *“But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant’s prayer and his plea for mercy, O Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said you would put your Name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive”* (2 Chronicles 6:18-21).

The temple in Jesus’ day was still to be a house of prayer. It was to be a place where God’s people could present their requests before God, including their heartfelt confessions of sin. Solomon asked that God would

hear the prayers of his people and forgive their sins. It has continued to be the same for God's people wherever they gather to worship him. They come together for prayer and forgiveness.

Solomon gives another purpose too: ***"As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm-when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name"*** (2 Chronicles 6:32,33). Perhaps Solomon realized that many Gentiles, too, would come to Jerusalem for the Passover. As Jesus went up to the temple that day, he may well have met people coming from some distance to Jerusalem for the festival. Some were Jewish and regularly worshiped in their own synagogues. Perhaps they saved money all their lives to make one trip to the temple for worship. These people did not come to see the building. They came to worship God in this place. Others, perhaps, were drawn more from curiosity than anything else. Some were not Jews, but Gentiles who knew something of the God of Israel and wanted to know more.

So what did they see and experience as they entered the temple grounds in Jerusalem? They saw what Jesus saw that day. They heard the money changers quarreling over exchange rates and merchants selling noisy animals. Could this have been done outside so the temple grounds would remain a quiet and joyful place? Surely, it could. But business was better inside. People came to pay their temple tax. If they had no Jewish shekels with them, they went to the money changers. On this day, ***"Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 'It is written,' he said to them, 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of robbers."*** Matthew 21:12-13 (NIV) Perhaps inside the temple grounds shekels were being exchanged for more than the going exchange rate. If anyone needed a dove or a sheep for sacrifice, it was right there. Can't you hear the merchants saying, "Don't trust what you get on the street. These animals have already been certified by the priests as being acceptable."

How many foreigners came to this place and found it no different than their heathen temples? How many faithful Jews came to this place and wondered why they felt closer to God in the quiet of their homes than in God's holy temple? Can you blame Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, for flying into a rage and chasing the businessmen out of his house? After all, it was his house. He was the Christ, the Son of God.

We could find a number of examples today of wealthy smooth-talking preachers who have used their ministries to fleece the flock instead of feeding it. You see, Jesus still has to chase the money changers out of his temple. But it is not helpful for us to look only into someone else's ministries. We need to look at our own. Sometimes, it may be that what we do keeps people away from their worship and prayers in this house of God. What would someone think after worshiping Jesus here with us? We would assume that we are a friendly congregation, ready to help those who come to worship Jesus, but someone else might suggest that we are unfriendly or uncaring, or arrogant.

The point is that it doesn't take a lot of unfriendly people to make God's house a place where the visitor has a hard time seeing the glory of God. It didn't take many money changers and merchants to turn the house of prayer into a den of thieves.

Let's draw a parallel between the temple or a visible gathering and the invisible, holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. Jesus has already cleansed the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, his temple, his body. ***"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless"*** (Ephesians 5:25-27). Everyone who believes is the bride of Christ! You are the bride of Christ. You have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. You have been washed in the cleansing waters of baptism. In Christ you are a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or blemish.

As the redeemed bride of Christ, we can make the place where we worship a home that feels like Jesus' home-a house of prayer for all. There are many ways we can make visitors feel welcome and make them feel they are in the right place.

In God's house the first impression we give to people is important. But it is not the most important thing. The MOST important thing in this place is that Jesus is here and he shares his love for us here in this house. We are here to hear God's Word! We need Jesus to cleanse his house so it can be a place where childlike faith grows.

Our text says: ***"The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they were indignant. 'Do you hear what these children are saying?' they asked him. 'Yes,' replied Jesus, 'have you never read, From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"*** (vv. 14-16). It was not just the money changers and the merchants that desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. God himself had come in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, to visit his people in that temple. But the leaders of the temple did not accept him.

Other people there in the temple did accept him. The blind and the lame came to him to be healed. Children praised him as the Messiah. ***"Hosanna to the Son of David!"*** they shouted. Did only the blind, the lame, and the children notice Jesus? No, others noticed too.

The leaders noticed Jesus but offered no praise to him. They did not accept Jesus, and they didn't want others to accept him either. They even asked him to keep the children quiet so that their songs of praise would not be heard. But Jesus said, ***"Have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"*** (v. 16). Why should Jesus not accept their praise? Jesus was the one who made such childlike faith possible. The blind and the lame saw him as their only hope. The children accepted him as their Savior.

If the place where we gather to worship is going to be a place where childlike faith is possible, then we must see Jesus here. He said, ***"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them"*** (Matthew 18:20). Here we are together in Jesus' name. And Jesus is here. He speaks to us in his Word. Today we heard a portion of the passion history. In that word Jesus told us of his great love for us. He loved us enough to suffer and die for our sins. The Lord Jesus is here with us, reaching out to us in his love with forgiveness, life, and salvation. Like the children, we can sing in this house of God, ***"Hosanna to the Son of David."*** Our hymns give us the opportunity to praise Jesus as the children did.

Through the Means of Grace, that is, the Gospel in the Word and the Gospel in the sacraments, the Holy Spirit nourishes our faith and warms our hearts, and Jesus strengthens our childlike faith here in this house because his Word and sacraments are here. That is what this house of God is all about. It's not about bricks, or paint, or artwork. It's not about pews and stained glass. It's about Jesus. We even have special worship services during Lent because we want to come together to see Jesus and hear again of all he suffered for us.

By his Word he cleanses our hearts. By his Word this house becomes a place where he comforts us and assures us that we are cleansed from all the sins we have committed. All week long, every day, we fight with our sinful flesh. We may feel like we win some skirmishes. But we lose most of the battles. When we come here, we come to confess our sins before God and hear that our sins have been forgiven. Here we lay down the burden of guilt, which weighs so heavily on us. We must not come into this house of God simply out of obligation. No, we need to come because we need what is here-Jesus and his Word. When we come, Jesus assures us that he has already cleansed our hearts and lives through his suffering and death.

If our children are going to grow up and learn to praise Jesus as their Savior, then Jesus has to be in our worship and in our lives. As God's people in the world today, we should remember why we have a special place of worship. It is because Jesus comes to us where we worship in his Word and sacrament to comfort, strengthen, and nourish the childlike faith in our hearts. Jesus is and must always be the only focus of our worship. Amen.