

A Chaos of Uncalculating Love

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 14, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (Mark 13:1-8, NRSV)

Last Sunday, we began our Fall Stewardship emphasis in worship. Our theme as we look ahead to 2022 and, we pray, a post-COVID era is *REEMERGENCE*. Again, notice that it is *NOT* "Restoration," for if all that the last two years have been about is going back to the way things were before, then we will have missed the point ... We will have missed what the Spirit is calling us to see, to do, and to be in the days to come. But that is not to be our fate. Instead, we journey together through the scriptures, buoyed up by some inspired music, and will ultimately re-dedicate ourselves to Christ and his mission.

As with last Sunday, so with this one, we are immersed in the gospel of Mark, in the final days of Jesus' earthly life. Last week, we saw how he was moved to both pity and anger by the spectacle of a poor widow who gave away her whole (meager) livelihood for the cause of a Temple concerned only with its *own* survival, its own interests. We saw how the very institution built to *glorify* God in its devotion to God's Law – to care for the widow and the orphan and the alien – only served, in its malignant self-concern, to ignore and discard them.

And so, this week, we see the divine judgment pronounced over an institute of religion that has lost its way, lost its purpose. Walking outside the Temple walls, an unnamed disciple of Jesus gives voice to what all were surely thinking: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

The Temple was an unsurpassed wonder of the world, a sight of extraordinary beauty. Newly reconstructed by Herod the Great a few decades before, the temple's retaining walls were composed of stones forty feet long. The temple itself occupied a platform twice as large as the Roman Forum and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that those who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding themselves!

And so, the unnamed disciple in the story is understandably impressed, and tries to share his sense of awe with Jesus. But Jesus isn't dazzled. Instead, he responds to the disciple's remark with a question: "Do you see these great buildings?" Why does Jesus ask the disciple if he can see what the disciple has just invited Jesus to see? Aren't the two of them seeing the same thing? Well, no ... they're not. They're not seeing the same thing at all.

What the disciple sees is the biggest, boldest, and most unshakeable symbol of God's presence he's capable of imagining. For him, those massive stones hold religious memory. They bolster a colonized people's identity. They offer the faithful a potent symbol of spiritual glory, pride, and worthiness. That's what the disciple sees.

But Jesus does not see that at all ... He sees ruins. Rubble. Destruction. Fragility, not permanence. Loss, not glory. He sees days to come when "not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." *All will be thrown down*, for when religion exists for itself, when it has moved from broken hearts and open spirits into soulless institutions maintained to the glory of our own pride, then it and they are doomed – doomed to die – and deservedly so.

To those standing there, these words of Jesus must have shocked them to the core. It must have sounded like the end of the world. He speaks of an event that for his generation would still be forty years in the future: the utter destruction of the Temple by the Romans, part of the larger siege of Jerusalem during the great Jewish War which began in 67 A.D., culminating in a loss of life so savage and so complete, that it would be almost 1900 years before the world saw its equal.

Jesus speaking in this alarming way naturally prompts his disciples to ask (in the verses immediately following our text for today), "When will this be? What will be the sign that this is about to take place?", to which Jesus responds with warnings of war and conflict ... of natural disasters ... of oppression and persecution. It's going to be hard, terribly hard, he says, but that the time of the end is still beyond all this. No one knows – no one *can* know – when *that* day is to come.

It is surely hard to see the "good news" in all this. It's hard to fathom how we could call this the "gospel." Divine warnings are never received easily. But then, rooted as we are in institutions and practices that have worked (at least for us) for a long time, to then hear that they, like us, are mortal ... well, perhaps that's exactly what we *need* to hear.

He invites his disciples – then and now – to look beyond the grandeur of the temple, or the church, and recognize that God will not be domesticated. Neither the temple nor the church is the epicenter of God's salvation; God is not bound by mortar and stone. God exceeds every edifice, every institution, every mission statement, every strategic plan, and every symbol human beings create in his name. And to the extent that we bind these ephemeral things too tightly to the Real Thing, then they fail us, and they fail the world.

The great English poet W. H. Auden put it this way, “Life is the destiny you are bound to refuse until you have consented to die.” This is what we and our churches need to hear to be ready for the gift of a new beginning, for rebirth only comes out of a sort of death first ... a Resurrection, only after a Cross. The old patterns, the old familiar ways of living and being in the world, always have to die before the new can be born.

But this means letting go, and letting go often involves some disillusionment. But perhaps such disillusionment is essential for us to move beyond, into the life for which we are intended. In her sermon collection, *God in Pain*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion — about ourselves, about the world, about God — and while it is almost always a painful thing, it is *never* a bad thing, to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth.”

Whatever else it is, it must not be received by us as though it were devoid of purpose, for we *must* see that the hand of God is in it. The greatest challenge of being the church today is trusting that simplest of truths, that in the midst of change we *really are* in the hands of God ... that we *really are* clay in the hands of the Master Potter who is fashioning us even now into *new* forms, perhaps most unexpected ... forms that can bear resurrection life and hope into the world, for a new day.

In one of his most stirring prayers, the great George MacLeod (1895-1991) – the Presbyterian minister, prophet, and visionary, moderator of the Church of Scotland, founder of the Iona Community – petitions to Christ for help in figuring how to be the church in a changing day. He confesses that we have spent too much time making the church, as he puts it, an “institute,” knowing in our gut that God wants the church to be so much more. This is the prayer, and I offer it to us as a prayer for us as we move forward, seeking to move in step with the Spirit –

*We are living in a changing day, Lord;
all the old rules and regulations for living
are slithering to the ground.
And You lived in a changing day, Lord:
all the old rules and regulations of the scribes and Pharisees
were slithering to the ground.
But it was Your custom to go to the temple:
to the noisome temple
sometime to the scandalized temple
listening to the mumbo jumbo,
but it was Your custom to go
till the new temple of Your body was available for [us].*

*Give us your grace in our changing day
To stand by the temple that is the present church.
The noisome temple
the sometime scandalized temple
that is the present church,*

*listening sometime to what again seems mumbo jumbo.
Make it our custom to go
till the new outline of Your Body for our day
becomes visible in our midst.*

*In the temple You healed, Lord Christ:
despite the noise and scandal, You healed.
And we are Your body even today.
You have no hands but our hands
no feet but our feet;
ours are the eyes with which You look out
compassionate on the world.*

*You have ordained that You just don't come
except through us.
Give us faith in great healings
despite the noise and scandal of our modern dimness.
Your grace and power are such:
none can ever ask too much.
Heal again, even through us,
for so You have ordained:
till the new outline of Your body
becomes visible in our midst.*

*In the temple You threw out the money changers, Lord Christ:
down the steps and out of the door –
and into the vacant aisles came the children
shouting for joy and dancing round.
Too often we are the money changers:
giving short change in spiritual things
to many who seek the true coin:
making the Church an institute
when you want it to be a chaos of uncalculating love.
Drive out from our hearts
our calculated offerings,
our easy responses,
and let child-like faith
flood into us again.
Grant us such abandon, of Your grace alone,
that we too shall be made strong
to go outside the city wall
outside holiness
and die in the bloody mess of another Calvary
that the Church at home may live again.*

To the glory of God! Amen.