

“A House of Prayer for All People”  
Isaiah 56:6-8; Malachi 3:1-14;  
Romans 16:25-27; Matthew 21:12-17

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Think about a family in their little abode. The mother and the father are talking. The father says, “You know, any time I sell a little bit of the grain we’ve harvested and we seem to get a little extra money, it has to be spent.” The mother says, “Just go and take care of this. We need to be ready for Passover.”

So he calls his son. His son asks what they had just been talking about. The father says, “Oh, it seems like any time we get money, it’s just like chaff thrown into the wind and blown away. But come, son. We need to go to the temple. We need to see if we can get the sacrifice of reparation done so that we’ve taken care of those sins and let go of them so we can go into this Passover week.”

The son asks, “Why do we need to go to the temple? Why can’t we just do it here?”

The father says, “The temple is where God’s presence is and we need to go and provide the sacrifice that is required.”

“But why do you have to spend money, Dad?”

“Well, it used to be that our forefathers had flocks and they could just take it out of the first fruits of those flocks. But now when we go, all I’ve got is grain, and we need at least some doves so that we can do the sacrifice. I have to pay for it with the little that we have.”

As they arrive at that temple that Herod has built into a little bit of a monstrosity, they hear a commotion. The son says, “Dad! Do you hear what they’re saying? The moneychangers have been driven out and the folks who were selling the doves are not there.”

The father frowns and says, “What is going on? How are we going to do this?”

It seems like some guy named Jesus has come along and upset things this day. The father wonders: What about this Jesus? How am I supposed to take care of the sacrifice I was supposed to make? I don’t have to spend the money anymore, but what am I to do? Can this Jesus take care of that reparation? He is, after all, still here. He’s inside gathering people around and he’s healing people and he’s teaching.

He seems to be inviting us to see the temple in a different way. I’m hearing people say he’s quoting Isaiah and saying that the temple should be a place of prayer for all peoples. How can that be? We have all these restrictions about who can be where. There’s a section for women. There’s a section for Gentiles. There’s a section for the Jewish men, and then, there’s a section just for the priests. What’s it mean to change

from sacrifice to prayer? I feel like I come to the temple just so I can appease God with a sacrifice at the right time. But to pray? To talk to God? What is this man, Jesus, inviting us to do?

I've heard a number of things that he's talked about. How he's invited us to deal with our anger. How he's even invited us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. How can we do that about the Romans? Something mysterious is going on, but I don't understand it. It seems that he's asking us, instead of sacrifice, to change our lives, to begin to see the world differently. He's always talking about love—loving God and loving one another. I think maybe it would be easier if I could just pay my money for a couple of doves and do my sacrifice and go home. The Sadducees and Pharisees are getting pretty upset as well. They don't seem to like what he's up to. There's even a rumor that they're even trying to find a way to get rid of him.

That's a possible scene. A point where a man is wondering, "What do I do with this man, Jesus, and his teachings and the changes he asks of my life?" Really, that question remains. It feels like Jesus is always asking me to change in some way, because I see the ways I am not loving. I can see the ways I try to do things all on my own. I can see the ways that I forget God is around and real. The question of whether I will let him change my life, lead me further into a new life, a different life, remains real.

We know what happens here, and we'll talk more about it in the week to come. The problem is that when I think about the changes Jesus invites me to make, they begin to feel pretty hard. That's when I need to remember that Jesus doesn't say that I have to do it all on my own. Jesus invites us to come, and to come to the table, and to remember the grace of God that begins it all. The forgiveness and hope that he brings us. The way he invites us to be a community, to be a place where we practice the very grace of God, to try to learn to do that loving thing in a world that doesn't always appreciate it. A place where we might worship God and recognize God's sustaining presence with us.

So as we think through this Lenten season, as we come to that point where we, too, are reminded of how hard it can be to follow Jesus, we are also invited to recognize that he invites us to not go it alone. His spirit is with us and among us. We can gather around the table and be a community of faith. We can trust that he will lead us, and that the new life he offers is better than the old life I've lived. And that the grace is real.

It is this time when Jesus comes to the temple that always makes me think about that question, "Will I follow him?" Will I accept the way he upturns my carts and changes my life? Will I accept the grace he gives, the sustenance he offers, the new life? Amen.