

A WEEK OF HOLY TERROR: DISTURBING THE PEACE

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Mark 11:15-28

What is peace? Now most would say that peace is an absence of violence, and they're not wrong. We say that a nation that is not at war is at peace, but an absence of violence or conflict does not define peace. You can have a peaceful country where people live in fear or oppression, where people are not free to live full lives. True peace is when people are able to live full and free lives.

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Lent. And for this season, I've put together a sermon series that I've entitled *A Week of Holy Terror*. Because if we look at the events of Holy Week—that time between Palm Sunday and Easter—in eight days we find a lot of stories that we know. These stories include the cleansing of the temple, Jesus' arrest and two trials, the denial by Peter, his praying in the garden, his crucifixion, and resurrection. These are all powerful stories that are important to our faith.

And the events of this week—that week leading up to Easter—they are nothing short of horrific. And so, I've titled this series *A Week of Holy Terror* because of the sheer brutality that Jesus endured in this week. He was seized, was violently assaulted. He was subjected to a sham trial not once but twice. He was betrayed by his closest companions and condemned by the very people he came to save. He suffered torture and ultimately execution. It was a week marked with unimaginable terror.

Although Holy Week begins on Palm Sunday with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, I'm going to hold that story back until our celebration of Palm Sunday.

So today I want to look at another event, the event we call the Cleansing of the Temple which takes place on Monday of Holy Week. We call it Holy Monday, the day right after Palm Sunday, because if you recall from the Palm Sunday story Jesus and his disciples arrive in Jerusalem with the great throngs of pilgrims coming to celebrate the Passover. They enter into Jerusalem and then immediately turn around and head back to Bethany to spend the night. The next morning, they do return to Jerusalem and this is when they entered the temple grounds.

The temple that stood in Jerusalem in Jesus Day was in fact the Second Temple. The first temple had been constructed by King Solomon around the year 1000 BC. That temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. The second temple was built around 500 BC and we can read of its construction in the book of Nehemiah. Then, 35 years before Jesus birth, that Second Temple underwent a massive renovation during the reign of King Herod. This was a pet project of his and Herod spared no expense on this project. He doubled the size of

the Temple Mount. He rebuilt or replaced nearly every part of the temple, including the massive foundation stones, which still stand today. The temple renovation was indeed one of the larger construction projects of the time, and it was a huge hit with the people. The temple became the center of religion and government in Jerusalem. People came from all over to admire this massive marble and the gold complex.

There was a central building which stood on the temple mount. It was a shoebox-shaped structure. Half of the building was the Court of the Priests. That's where you had the Holy of Holies—the altar to God. Only the priests were allowed to go into the altar, and only priests were allowed in that half of the building.

The other half of the building was divided into the Court of Men, which was the room closest to the Court of the Priests. And then behind that was the Court of Women. And then outside this building, but within the surrounding walls of the temple campus was an area known as the Court of the Gentiles. This is where the non-Jews were allowed to come to worship and pray. Yes, there were people who were drawn to the faith of the Jews who had not been born Jewish. When Jesus taught in the temple, he taught in the court of the Gentiles.

On this morning of Holy Week, Jesus and his disciples enter into the temple complex, and once they are there in the outer court—the Court of the Gentiles—Jesus begins to do something that we find uncharacteristic of him. He goes to where merchants are selling items and exchanging currency. He pushes over their tables and then he drives these merchants, as well as people who are purchasing, out of the court and out of the temple complex. And in addition, *he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.*

Jesus justifies these actions with words from scripture. He quotes the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, asking, *'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'*

So, what is going on here? What compels a usually gentle Jesus to resort to this level of violence? The answer is that for Jesus, the sole purpose of the temple should be to worship God. That, and no more. Certainly, it shouldn't be a place of commerce.

The temple was a destination for pilgrims. Jews would travel hundreds and thousands of miles to worship in that grand structure. This worship included animal sacrifices and monetary contributions to the temple.

If you are a pilgrim traveling from another country, would you rather travel with your own sacrificial doves or sheep, or would you rather just buy them in Jerusalem? It would be much easier to buy what would need in Jerusalem. There were merchants in Jerusalem who offered these animals for sale. They were even “pre-blessed” by the priests.

Furthermore, there were also those pilgrims who desired to make monetary offerings to the temple. However, the only allowable currency for these offerings was a Jewish shekel. If you came from another country, say Egypt for example, it is unlikely that you would have any shekels in your pockets. Moneychangers were present for the necessary currency exchange. Of course, they provided this service for a fee.

Although the animal sellers and money changers had always been present in Jerusalem, it was only under the administration of the current high priest, Caiaphas, that they had been allowed to operate on the temple grounds in the Court of the Gentiles.

The court of the Gentiles was the place where non-Jews would come to pray. And remember, Jesus cites the words of Isaiah, saying, *My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*. That *for all nations* is important. The house of God is open to all—Jews and Gentiles. Jesus not only objects to the crass commercialization taking place on the temple complex, but also to the fact that it is disruptive for the worship of the Gentiles. Because the Gentiles, according to Isaiah, have the God-given right to worship, and they should be able to worship in peace, just as the Jews worshiped.

Think of it this way: Have you seen the Girl Scouts out selling cookies lately? Have you bought your Thin Mints yet? So, imagine this, imagine that a Girl Scout troop sets up a table over there selling their cookies. They have the approval of the Session to do this. Out front, Girl Scouts are standing by the road waving signs that say, “Buy cookies here.” And during our worship, strangers are walking in and out to buy cookies. They try to be quiet, but it is still disruptive to our worship.

The Gentiles did not have leverage with the temple authorities to affect change. It has even been suggested that the temple authorities received kickbacks from these sales. Jesus, in essence, is not just objecting to the profit-taking happening in God’s house, he is also standing up for the Gentiles, protecting their place of worship.

There's another part of this story that often gets overlooked in all the hubbub. That is the line, *and [Jesus] would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple*. What does this mean? Well, this goes back to a Jewish law that prohibited people carrying personal items into the temple. In other words, the temple isn't meant to be a shortcut from point A to point B. You can't go shopping and carry your bags with you into worship. The purpose of the temple is to be a destination with a singular purpose: the worship of God. Anything else is a distraction.

When the chief priests and scribes get word of what Jesus had done in the temple, we read that they then began looking for ways to kill him. Why would they

want to kill him? Well, for one thing, he had broken the law; he had disturbed the peace.

Just for fun, I looked into the Tennessee Code about disturbing the peace. According to the 2024 Tennessee Code, Title 39, Criminal Offenses, under Section 39-17-305, Jesus could have been charged with disturbing the peace (disorderly conduct) if he “commits an offense in a public place and with intent to cause public annoyance or alarm.” I would say he is guilty of that.

According to this statute, Jesus commits two offenses: First, he “engages in violent or threatening behavior,” (yes, he did) and, Second, he “creates a hazardous or physically offensive condition by any act that serves no legitimate purpose.” Yes, it would be easy to argue that his actions served no legitimate purpose other than to make a point.

But you know what? It does not appear that it was his actions in the temple that disturbed the temple authorities. The gospel reports that the chief priests and scribes—the temple authorities—were afraid of Jesus because the people/the crowds *were spellbound by his teaching*.

And this is where we find one of the reasons for Jesus's execution. And there will be more. The temple administration fears Jesus because the people listen to him. And if they were listening to Jesus, the priests and scribes were afraid that their own power and influence must be decreasing. And by their logic, if they are listening to Jesus then the scribes and the priests are afraid that he's not listening to them, that their own power and influence must be decreasing as people pay attention to Jesus. They don't like that they are threatened by Jesus. He upsets their peace.

So why does Jesus decide to disturb the peace like that? Because that is what he's called to do—to challenge the status quo, to raise the hard questions, to point a spotlight on injustice and inequality in this world so that all may see it so that nothing can hide under a veneer of peace when there is no peace. That should be our charge as well, to point a spotlight on injustice and inequality in this world, to overturn every stone looking for those people who've been mistreated, forgotten, are ignored, those people who've been oppressed.

So, as we enter into this season of Lent, let us recommit to be Christ followers and let us disturb the peace. Let us disrupt the peace of this world so that it may be replaced with the peace of God. Amen.