



This Is Not the Time for Trivia

TEXT
Mark 11:12–24

April 22, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I was moved yesterday by the service for First Lady Barbara Bush. I loved Jeb Bush's comments about his mother, a woman who has been a grandmother for the nation. I was also moved to see presidents, both Democrat and Republican, sitting in the same pew. And for a moment — just for a moment — Barbara Bush brought together all of us; and the political platforms, which for so many are gods to be worshipped, seemed embarrassingly small, trivial even.

But that was not the time for trivia. And then, as 43 pushed 41 (as we call them) in his wheelchair, it was a reminder of what really constitutes power in this world and what does not — for on this day, they were not presidents, but father and son, both with broken hearts. They were defined not by what they had done, but by who they loved.

Of course, we are all defined by who we love. Jesus teaches us that.

It was the day after Palm Sunday, the scent of palm branches still hanging in his clothes, and Jesus came upon a fig tree, abundant in foliage. Apparently he missed breakfast, for he is hungry — or “hangry,” as they say. Because, even though it is

not fig season, when Jesus finds no figs on the tree, he curses it. A day later, the tree would be withered to its roots.

I read stories like this, and I wonder if the disciples ever thought, “Now I wonder what the future preacher is going to say about this!”

Then Jesus entered the temple. The temple grounds were a frenzy of activity — people buying and selling. It was like a bizarre of religious transaction. To make offerings in the temple, you had to have the right coins. To aid in right worship, you could exchange coins, replacing unclean Roman coins with appropriate coins. You could exchange them there on the temple grounds.

If you did not have animals blemish-free for sacrifice, you could purchase them there at the temple, so that you could keep the law. It happened every day.

But on this day, it enraged Jesus; and as he turns over the tables, he screams, “My Father's house is to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers.”

I would hate for Jesus to say that to us. I would hate for the risen Christ to be angry at us in this way.

Let's look at both of these statements. *My Father's house*

is to be a house of prayer for all nations — not just for us, not just for the Jews, but for *all*.

There's something pretty basic in Christian worship — because God is God of all people, then when we worship God, we are to pray for, care for, care about all.

For those of us who live with siblings, one thing we know is that we could never go to our parents and say, “I would like you to care for me, but forget about that good-for-nothing brother of mine. Just care about me.” It's not going to happen.

The same is true with God. God is not going to care about some of God's children and neglect the rest of her family. If we want to want what God wants, we must be mindful of the whole world. It is a high calling. There is nothing trivial about it.

Jesus said, “My house is to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you made it a den of robbers” — the criminal's hideout.

Here's the thing: The robber's den is not the scene of the crime. Jesus does not overturn the money changers' tables because they are cheating. The robber's den is where the criminal goes to feel safe, to be told everything is all right. The crime has taken place somewhere else.

But in the robber's den, you are known to be a criminal — and still they say, "That's OK. You are OK. This is the way we are supposed to live."¹

In Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, Briony Tallis is a complicated young woman who has done some bad things in her life. But she is striving to do some good things and becomes a nurse to care for the British soldiers during World War II. She is called to care for boys brought home bearing devastating wounds. She cleaned wounds, she changed bandages, she removed shrapnel. She looked at men whose bodies would never be the same, broken in ways that are hard to imagine. She sat with the dying.

At one point she talked to Private Latimer. He looked at her in fear, and she said, "We will have you fixed up in no time. You are just fine. We will have you fixed up in no time." Over and over she said it, but she was lying of course.² But lying seemed to be the best option.

Maybe in that moment, I don't know. But it doesn't work in here. When we miss what we are for, it's not love, it's not grace to say, "That's OK, everything is fine." That's the problem with the robber's den; they lie about what's OK and what's not. And if that happens in the presence of God, then the temple is worth no more than a fruitless fig tree.

I think what Jesus is saying is that you have turned church from being the place that proclaims what God wants for the world into a place that has settled with justifying the status quo. You

have taken the boldest dreams of God and exchanged them for trivia. If I understand the text, Jesus says, worship is no time for trivia.

When it comes to matters of truth, when it comes to matters of what God wants for the world, I want what God wants — or at least we want to want what God wants, don't we?

To say it another way, it is important to make sure we are not just busy ... selling coins, buying animals and playing worship. No, if faith is going to matter to us, it needs to bear some fruit in our lives.

And if that is going to happen, then we all need a place and a time when we remember what God wants for us. This is my point today. I think there is so much trivia in our lives that we all need a time and a place that reminds us what matters most. We need a time and a place that reminds us what time is for.

I pray that worship does that for you. I pray that this is a house of prayer for all nations, for the big things in your life and for the big things in the world.

Just an example: Today is Earth Day. It is a day for all nations. Earth Day was first observed in 1970. Things have not gotten better since 1970 when it comes to the natural world. Oceans are warming and rising. Coral reefs are bleaching. Polar ice caps are stressed. Species extinction is accelerating. The impact of extreme weather is common.

I was taken aback two months ago when I first began to hear the reports from Cape Town, South

Africa. In 1990, Cape Town was a city of two million people. Today it is a city of almost four million people. And the city is running out of water. City officials are talking about turning off the water. The reservoir is running out. Already water has been dramatically restricted. But it may not be enough. In Cape Town, they talk of "Day Zero." That's when you open your faucet and nothing comes out.

Can you imagine a city of four million people running out of water?

I know for many of us, earth care is not a day but a lifestyle. That's why so many of you participated in the 24-hour prayer vigil for earth care this weekend. That's why almost 400 of you signed up to alter your diet during Lent. We don't always think of it, but decisions we make every day — what we buy, what we wear, where we travel, what we choose for lunch — all have ethical implications and can demonstrate love for neighbor.

Christiana Peppard is a theologian, ethicist and expert on global fresh water. She warns that by 2025, less than 10 years, 180 million people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the global population could be under stress conditions.³

What does it mean to be a house of prayer for all nations when this is the circumstance of the earth?

She states that our modern practice of agriculture consumes 70 percent of fresh water, only a small portion of which returns to the water supply. That's one

reason diet matters. One pound of beef requires almost 1800 gallons of water — that is if the cattle are fed grains in feed lots.

Hear me clearly, this is bigger than pointing fingers at one industry or another. This is all of us. We have built systems in which we all participate, and it is killing us. We have endeavored to do a good thing, and indeed have done something good. But sometimes our effort to do something good results not only in the good, but also harmful, destructive consequences for others. If we are to be a people who pray for all nations, then there is a moral requirement to address the negative consequences, unintended as they may be.

I would love to come into the presence of God and have God tell me, “Don’t worry, it’s all fine. I’m going to fix you up in no time.” But I fear that’s the robber’s den.

I know what God wants. God wants us to care. God wants us to live in a way that reflects that care. (That’s not the same as saying I know the specifics of what to do). I’m just saying I know God wants us to care and doesn’t want us to be apathetic about the world.

But I don’t always want what God wants.

So we — all of us — need a place, and we need a time that reminds us what matters most, what matters to God.

I watched a man wheel his father out of the church. They are both presidents, but yesterday they were just father and son, defined not by what they have

accomplished, but by who they loved.

Given how busy we all are accomplishing, we need a place to remind us that we are all defined by who and how we love. We need that time to remind us of the big things that time is for.

I hope, I believe that is what we are about here. Let us endeavor to ensure that this is a place where we remember together what God wants for us and for all.

¹I am grateful to Dr. Eugene Boring for this insight. *Mark: New Testament Library* (2006), p. 323

²Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (2001), p. 284

³Christiana Peppard, *Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis* (2014), p. 31

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.