

Rev. Lynne Ogren
September 27, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
17th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Matthew 21:10-16; 23-32

Matthew 21:10-16 (Read before gospel text)

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

¹²Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³He said to them, "It is written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer';
but you are making it a den of robbers."

¹⁴The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. ¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry ¹⁶and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'"

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

When I went to seminary, I took some of my classes online and twice a year I went to the campus of Luther Seminary for two-week intensive courses. The first few times I went to St. Paul I stayed with a friend I had known from my early childhood and it was fun to become reacquainted as adults.

At the time Deb had a consulting business for non-profits that were struggling. She would become their interim executive director and help them reorganize their finances and staff and systems and then hire a new executive director to take her place.

Back in 2010, she was working with an organization called Avenues for Youth that provides housing, education support, job training, and counseling for teenagers that end up on the street in the Twin Cities. Most of the teens are homeless because they are somewhere on the spectrum of Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer and their families have kicked them out.

Deb loved to talk about the staff at Avenues and the youth who came and stayed for a time and then were given the tools and support they needed to make it in the world. Avenues provided these young people a community of care with adults who accepted them and cared for them in ways they had never been loved before.

Each time I visited, a new dimension of their program developed. In addition to the large home that could house several young people at a time, they began a host home program where youth could stay with a couple or a family in their home while they got on their feet.

Deb's enthusiasm and love for this ministry was exciting for me to see. Living where I did there were few homeless people and I had never really thought about the teens who found

themselves without a home or family. As heartbreaking as that was to me, Deb had found a way—a ministry—that was making a difference for these young people where she lives.

Now I said that Deb and I had been friends as children. Our parents were friends, with several other couples from their church, when we were little, living in the Bay Area in California. On one of my visits to seminary, Deb's parents were in town so they stopped by the campus to have lunch with me. In our conversation Deb's mother told me how sad she was that Deb didn't go to church any more.

I hear that from a lot of parents of adult children. They raised their kids going to church every Sunday, bringing them to Sunday School and Confirmation and youth group, but then once they grew up they move away from church involvement and have a hard time coming back.

I said to Deb's mother, "I think Deb is more engaged in God's work in the world than a lot of Christians I know, including me." Now, I don't think it's wise to rank the ministries we are given by God as being better or lesser than others. Martin Luther said that parenting our children and doing our jobs faithfully and well are just as important a calling as being a priest or bishop or pope!

The thing I struggled with as I was taking all these wonderful seminary classes and learning about this important ministry to homeless youth was that this was a ministry that lived outside of any church affiliation. They gladly accepted volunteer help and financial support from local congregations, but they began addressing a deep need in their community as people of the community. I remember wrestling with the idea that Avenues for Youth was doing God's work and that Christians had somehow missed the memo.

I'm sure you can think of many other services in the world that are not affiliated with any religious organization. In fact, that's one of the challenges churches face these days—there are so many non-profits to give to that the church is competing for charitable giving dollars. We are discovering that people give to organizations, including churches, when they see them doing something they find valuable or important to them.

This means that as the church we need to up our game in terms of being able to not only identify the ministry God is calling us to do in our community and the larger world, but we also need to be able to communicate it well with our members and the community we live in and serve.

So, what does this all have to do with our readings for today? The question posed to Jesus by the religious leaders of his day is basically, "What gives you the right to do what you are doing?" And what had he been doing? After his grand entrance into Jerusalem, with crowds cheering and palm branches waving, Jesus entered the temple and turned over the tables of the many changers.

The money changers were there to convert Roman currency into Temple currency so that worshipers could buy animals for their sacrifices. But this probably wasn't an even exchange. The money changers charged a fee, which paid the religious ruling class and the Roman forces.

In turning over their tables, Jesus is overturning the system with its clear hierarchy of power and authority. He is challenging their system that supported not only the temple itself, but likely lined the pockets of the Roman forces assigned to the temple, and maybe even the pockets of those who worked those tables.

Then the sick and the lame came to Jesus for healing. Children began to sing his praises, calling him “Son of David!” And at the beginning of our assigned reading Jesus was in the temple teaching. This is a good summary of what the church is about: tending to the hurts and deep needs in the world, giving our praise and worship to Christ who is the head of the church, and teaching one another about the love and grace of God.

And the religious leaders wonder, by whose authority does Jesus do these things? Jesus deflects their question by pointing them to John the Baptist, one who came out of nowhere, with no religious authority, and yet people flocked to hear him call them into a new way of life, to point to the One who would set them free from their pain, and sent them into the world as changed human beings. John was outside the church structures doing the work of God.

Jesus basically said to the chief priests and the elders of the temple, God’s will is being done—with or without you. Those you despise are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you because they have heard and believed in the Good News that God has for them. It doesn’t mean you can’t be included in the kingdom of God, but in order to do that you need to follow those who have heard the word, believe it, and now live it.

As the church, we are not the only game in town when it comes to addressing the needs in the world. We live in a time where there are government agencies to help some of the hurt and pain, but we know they don’t have enough funding to do it all. There are other non-profits that try to pick up the slack—like Avenues for Youth or Boys and Girls Club or Farm in the Dell or Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch. I’m sure you can name many others.

The challenge the church is given today is to ask—are we participating in God’s work in the world? Are we serving, worshiping, and teaching in ways that proclaim the gospel—the Good News—of Jesus Christ and engaging with others so that the world can receive the gifts of life we know and cherish?

A few years ago, a Lutheran congregation in a neighboring suburb of Minneapolis caught wind of Avenues for Youth and thought their community could use something similar. They partnered with Avenues to create a second campus for housing and support services and some of their members became host homes for the youth who were in need of their care.

God’s work will be done in the world, with or without the structures of the church. The church has a role to bring the good news of Christ to places outside of these walls.

When the pandemic began and churches stopped worshipping together, our ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton told reporters that the church is not closed! The church is open and active in all the places the work and will of God is being done. Let’s not miss out on what Jesus is up to!

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Drawn together in the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

In all the world, give your church unity, O God. Inspire all the baptized with the mind of Christ. Where the church is powerful and where it struggles, shape us with humility and obedience so that your love may be at work in us.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Preserve and keep your creation, O God. Mend and redeem places that are polluted and damaged, especially places of wildfire and hurricanes, so that all of creation confesses you as Lord. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Turn the nations toward life. We thank you for the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and for her passion for equality under the law. Uphold honest judges and insightful juries throughout our criminal justice system, and assist our nation in its task of filling the Supreme Court. Teach us to trust your authority.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Our lives are yours, O God. Defend the lives and welfare of those who are abused or neglected, hungry or exploited, bullied or lonely, or cast aside by those who are meant to care for them. Bless ministries of care in our community, and guide your church to partner with them to do the work you have given us to do in the name of Jesus. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Around us are the sick: there is starvation, the virus continues, many persons receive no medical attention, our neighbors and dear ones are ill. Nearby are needs of which we are unaware. Send your holy angels to uphold all who face personal troubles, especially those listed in our bulletin and those we name in our hearts. *wait*

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Christ our Lord.

Amen.