



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 9, 2017

"Three Stories" (Palm Sunday message)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

Luke 19:28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

Luke 19:29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, He sent two of the disciples,

Luke 19:30 saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

Luke 19:31 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Luke 19:32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

Luke 19:33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

Luke 19:34 They said, "The Lord needs it."

Luke 19:35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

Luke 19:36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

Luke 19:37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,

Luke 19:38 saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Luke 19:39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

Luke 19:40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Three stories. Three stories that are not only about Jesus but also about us. Three challenging stories that prepare our hearts and prompt us to act on the message of Easter.

First story is the well-known Palm Sunday story, which we highlighted today with the kids waving palm fronds as they came into the Sanctuary. Four days before Jesus is captured, tried in court, tortured and then killed, He enters Jerusalem on a donkey. It is a like huge and ancient ticker-tape parade. Jesus and the disciples enter the Holy City with people cheering, waving palm fronds, and spreading their own cloaks down on the road out of respect. People shout, "Hosanna" (which means 'save us')! Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest Heaven!"

Take a moment to imagine yourself there. Close your eyes. Right now. What is the day like? Sunny? Hot? Breezy? Or is the wind blowing dust all around? Where are YOU in the scene? Are you walking in the parade with Jesus as one

of the male disciples or one of the women in His entourage? What are you feeling when you enter into the gates of Jerusalem and you see hundreds, if not thousands, lining the streets, cheering, and shouting? Are you amazed? Are you proud to be with Jesus?

OR are you NOT part of the Jesus entourage but in the crowd of people, shouting with excitement, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" Are you one of the people waving palm fronds, or throwing down your cloak to show respect to Jesus?

Or maybe you're like one of the Pharisees in the crowd, the ones who doubt that Jesus is who He says He is. You're skeptical, puzzled, disgusted, or cynical about the whole Jesus thing.

If you chose to be in the Jesus entourage, maybe you were bursting with pride. Maybe you're saying: "Hey, I traveled with this man and I'm with Him. I'm proud to be associated with Him. And finally, Jesus is going to get the credit He deserves."

Perhaps you chose yourself to be someone in the crowd. You're cheering because Jesus is really the King. For many in the crowd that day maybe they thought FINALLY we will have someone who will overthrow the Roman government. Finally we have a leader who will unite the Jewish people. Finally, we have a miracle man at the helm. I heard He has healed lepers, the lame, the blind, the deaf, and even brought back the dead to life.

Or if you were one of the Pharisees there, maybe you walk away angry.

There is great celebration and hoopla in this story, but Jesus knows not all who cheer Him are with Him. He also knows living for the roar of the crowd isn't good because JUST five days later, that same crowd will call for Him to be crucified. For perhaps on Palm Sunday they were more into the sizzle and the spectacle of Jesus arriving on Palm Sunday.

Maybe they were more for what can Jesus do for ME—heal, save. Perhaps Jesus is sensing this. He arrives in Jerusalem and they call Him King, but He knows the human heart can be fickle, especially in a crowd.

So that's story #1.

The next day Jesus and the disciples are walking towards Jerusalem from the town of Bethany. (I guess they decided to get an AirBnB outside the city the night before). And then this peculiar thing happens. Story number two.

Mark 11:12 On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.

Mark 11:13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see whether perhaps He would find anything on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.

Mark 11:14 He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And His disciples heard it.

What a peculiar story. And so friends, it's time for a little DENDROLOGY – the study of trees.

This is a fig tree (a photo of a fig tree was shown). After winter, a healthy fig tree will lose its leaves and in their place little nodules or nubs will appear just before the figs come. I have read that travelers would look for these nubs on fig trees,

pull them off and eat them as they walked. These nubs were known to be tasty, scrumptious. Healthy fig tree branches are filled with them. But on this day Jesus looks at the tree and doesn't find the nubs. So He pronounces that this is a dead tree, a diseased tree.

Jesus sees a person's faith like a fig tree that can be diseased and die. And we can see that in the third story.

Now the third story in our triptych. Jesus goes into the Temple, and what He sees confirms the diseased heart of religious people. It is not a town that really knows who He is. It is not a town that has faith in Him even though they just praised Him in a parade.

He walks into the Temple courtyard and sees table after table of people selling things – doves for sacrifices, moneychangers who take people's money and change it into Temple currency at an exorbitant rate. And you have to buy the Temple currency there. They're trapped to pay higher prices because of the law of supply and demand.

There is lots of activity, lots of noise, and lots of exchanging of money. But where in the Temple was the worship, the spirituality, the true conversation or prayer to God?

Jesus then gets angry. He is in angry but in control. And like a home court team, He says in essence, "This is My house! No one does this in My house! Crown Me or kill Me, this is My house!"

Matt. 21:13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."

Picture this. Jesus walks in and turns tables over and the seats of those who sold animals. Coins flying. Birds flying. People fleeing. He didn't hit anyone. He didn't hurt anyone. He didn't lose it but it was controlled righteous anger.

He did this once before right at the beginning of his ministry. We can read about it in the second chapter of the Gospel of John. Right at the start of His ministry, Jesus went into the Temple and threw tables over and chased out the moneychangers and the sellers of animals to be killed for sacrifice. He had a whip, *a la* Indiana Jones, which He cracked in the air to chase everyone out.

And now three years later, Jesus is back in the Temple and it's the same scene! When I get to Heaven I am going to ask Jesus, "Can you please give me a visual of that scene because I really want to see it. Just curious."

Why does His ministry end with throwing tables over in the Temple? All the Gospel stories talk about His getting angry in the Temple. What is He trying to convey and communicate?

Perhaps by causing the ruckus, Jesus is saying, "If you think I'm always about being meek and mild while riding peacefully in a parade and waving at people like the Queen of England, then you have another thing coming. This is a different kind of royalty."

If you think Jesus is just about serving you and saving you...then you have another thing coming. If you think that God is someone to control and that He is to follow you, and He is to take directives to you as if YOU are the Lord, then you have another thing coming. If you think worship is only about you - it's wrong.

The Temple was supposed to be a sacred place, a place where ALL were welcomed. It's supposed to be a place of prayer. And what kind of prayer? Healing prayer! Let's read the quote of Jesus again but add the next verse:

"My house shall be called a house of prayer but you are making it a den of robbers. The blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He cured them. (Matt. 21:13-14)

After Jesus throws over the tables, what happens next in the Temple? Yes, some people probably ran away, but not all. The blind and the lame come up to Him and He prays for them and He cures them.

If people knew our church were known for that kind of prayer, you couldn't build a door big enough to let them in. Is it no surprise that in the last two healing services more than 400 people showed up for healing prayer? That is what a House of Prayer does. We expect God to show up and do great things.

But again I ask—who are we in the scene? If you are the chief priests and the scribes, their response in the very next verse is this:

But 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. (Matt. 21:15)

Fascinating response. Jesus heals people miraculously and the Pharisees and Scribes became angry. We might get angry when we hear healing stories. Either we don't believe them or we say why didn't my loved ones or I get healed? Doesn't God love me? So instead of trusting God's sovereignty, we get angry.

People have often only interpreted Jesus throwing over the moneychangers' tables as saying He is against money, or against rich people or against business. No, that's not the case. He is not against money. And as you know, the Bible says it is not money but the love of money that is the root of all evil. When money becomes your god, that is bad.

Nor is God against rich people because there were several rich women who helped support Jesus in His ministry. Their families must have been in business. And it was the wealth of the wise men who gave baby Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which must have provided Joseph and Mary a good start in the carpentry

business and the means to run away to Egypt when Herod sent soldiers to kill Jesus.

So what else is going on here? Again, put yourself in the scene. You are in The Temple, the Holy Temple, and the most holy area in Jerusalem where the actual presence of God was supposed to reside. Remember, in the Old Testament God resided or was supernaturally present in the Holy Tent or Tabernacle that traveled with the Israelites. His glory, His Shekinah, as it says in Hebrew, was more present there.

Only later in the New Testament when God sends His Holy Spirit that our bodies become the new Temple of God. When we follow Jesus, God's Holy Spirit begins to live in us. That's why we need to keep good care of our body. It is God's temple.

So here is the Temple in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus (a picture of the Temple courts was shown).

Okay, here we see many different courts surrounding the most holy place called the Holy of Holies. Inside it would be the ark of the Covenant, one of the most Holy objects in all of the Bible that's made of Acacia wood, which is the same family as koa wood. And inside the Ark of the Covenant are the tablets of stone bearing the Ten Commandments.

This was like God's throne room. The Jews believe that God's presence was greater in the Holy of Holies than any other place. There was also something known as the mercy seat in there where the High priest would sprinkle blood to atone for the sins of the people for that year.

(By the way, as an aside, we are thinking of taking a church tour with staff as hosts to Israel next year, so if you are interested, stop by the Front Desk to give your name and contact info. We will start an email list so we can send you info when we have the details.)

Outside the Holy Place was an altar where animals were sacrificed – oxen, doves.

Now notice that there are four courts – a Court of Israel, Court of the Priests, Court of Women but then all around on the outside was the Court of the Gentiles. The Court of the Gentiles is the only area where the non-Jews, also referred to as Gentiles or pagans, could go. They weren't allowed any farther into the Temple without great penalty. (In fact, the Romans allowed the Jews to enact the death penalty if a Gentile went farther than those courts.) It was in the Court of the Gentiles – those outer courts—that Jesus drove out all of the moneychangers and animal sellers.

Now we are getting a bit more insight into Easter Week beginning with Palm Sunday.

Why was Jesus so mad? It is because these tables were giving the non-believers the wrong impression about God. In fact, some of these tables were in essence blocking the Gentiles from understanding the Gospel.

The Gospel is not about merchandise. Worse yet, it is not about business as usual. It's not about excluding people, or blocking people to get to God. It's not about rejecting the Messiah who was in their midst.

Jesus saw that the Jewish religion had become a set of rules and regulations. That and the many requirements the Pharisees and the Scribes were burdening the Jewish people with were blocking the people from getting to God. The Jewish religion was like a fig tree that was diseased and was no longer bearing fruit.

Jesus was saying, "I am the true presence of God on earth, not in a small room called the Holy Place. I can be with you in your hearts. I do not want people to be blocked in some outside courtyard to make them distant from me. I want them to have a FULL ACCESS pass to Me.

And I am the ultimate High Priest who sacrifices not an innocent Lamb but I will become the Lamb itself and willingly sacrifice Myself so that you might be free and know God and be fully forgiven of all of your sins, not once a year but for all time. You will no longer need doves or oxen to sacrifice. I will be the ultimate sacrifice."

So here is where the three stories all come together that should make us tremble.

Jesus is saying, "You may have allowed Me to enter your heart, the city of your soul. And you may have praised Me and honored Me as if with palm fronds and the laying down of your cloaks because you want Me to be your savior.

"Then know this: as your King I want a lot more than your busyness, your charity, and your attending church or Bible studies. I want you. I want you to come into the full presence of God. And if I am in your heart, if I am your Lord then I am going to change things around in your calendar and rearrange your priorities for things that you thought you had no time for. I am going to change your heart so you will choose to give generously to things you didn't expect. I am going to rearrange the tables of your life. Maybe even turn one or two over. I am going to change your character.

"And if you don't let me truly be the Lord of your heart, if you don't stop trying to control Me and be above Me, if you block people in the courtyards from getting to Me due to laziness or apathy or lack of generosity, then your faith is actually diseased like a doomed fig tree.

"If you are really bearing my fruit, then I want to know that as you pray the Lord's Prayer, like many of you did last Sunday, you WILL forgive the debts of others as you have been forgiven; that you will bring My will on earth as it is in heaven; that you will share the daily bread that I have given you with others.

"I want you to truly have a heart for Me when I was a stranger and you welcomed Me and I was naked and you gave Me clothing and when I was sick or in prison you visited Me."

And you will say, as it says in the Gospel of Matthew:

Matt. 25:37... 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

Matt. 25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

Matt. 25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

Matt. 25:40 And the king Jesus will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

And if we didn't change after we accepted Christ into our hearts, then Jesus says,

Matt. 25:45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

Matt. 25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

You see, Easter is coming. It is not just an event for a Hallmark card. It is not just our society's excuse to have an Easter brunch or lunch or dinner. It's not about Easter eggs. It's about God coming to earth in the form of a man – Jesus – fully human and yet fully God.

It's about Jesus giving up His life for us. It's about Jesus being tortured for us as He was trying to explain what life is really about.

And here's the deal: if Jesus has really come into our hearts, we find He overturns our tables in the courtyard of

our hearts of what we once thought was priority. If it's all about money, He throws our table over. If it's all about me having to do sacrifices of animals, like good deeds to win God's love, He throws that table over.

If we think it's all about me and my needs, He throws that table over. If we think the faith is all about me and my friends and my church and not about all of the people in the outer courts – the so-called Gentiles, then Jesus will definitely throw that table over.

As I mentioned last week, there can be a real tendency for us to make the faith all about us – that God will protect me and my family and my friends.

But the Gospel is all about launching out. Like a lighthouse we might be a beacon to shine brightly to warn people about the rocks and reefs in life, but if people's boats hit those rocks and start to sink, the lighthouses are not about us sitting in our comfy lighthouse lounge, but it's about launching out. Most people don't know that lighthouses are not just about shining a light of safety it is about going out and saving people.

I said last week there could be a voice inside of us that says, "I have no desire to tell people to come to our Easter service. Even though the services are geared to introducing people Jesus I don't care. Besides if I take those Easter Invite cards and hand them out what if people really come? Then it's more crowded, and less parking places, and then I have to come earlier or I might not get my favorite area where I sit."

But Jesus says this really clearly – it's not about you! It's about the Gentiles— those who don't know God. Don't block them. Welcome them even it means you are inconvenienced. None of the chairs or parking places has your name. Actually invisibly, they have our visitors' names. A church exists for those who are not here. We make room for those who have yet to come.

It's about people who are dying or who are in despair and don't know that if God were in their life they would have more hope and strength.

How dare we keep the blessings of God to ourselves? We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others. Surely there are people we should be inviting. If everyone brought one new person we would double the amount of people who would hear about Jesus and experience Him. That simple. Everyone bring at least one. How's that for a goal after 40 days of fasting as many of you have?

The mark of a Christian who truly has had Christ enter into the Jerusalem of their hearts is that they want to tell others about Jesus. It is truly like one beggar finding food and telling other beggars where the food is. How dare we keep the food all to ourselves? It is like being in a poor country and seeing hundreds of starving children and we not telling them where the food is.

If we take stock of ourselves this week and we say we are too busy to invite people to Easter and only care about Easter brunch, then we have to ask, "Why?"

How did our faith get to be only about us? How did our faith not be about reaching others? How did our faith get to I just don't want to be inconvenienced? How did it get to a point that we use God to make ourselves richer in blessings but not help others get richer in blessings by introducing them to Him? How did we become like a fig tree that is not bearing fruit for others?

If Jesus has come into our lives, then our character should be changing.

The theme of the last HIM conference was mercy. Are we known for mercy as followers of Jesus? Here's a take away question: What's a table in our lives that Jesus might want to throw over?

Is there someone we need to forgive? Is there someone we need to show more grace as God has shown us grace? Is there someone we need to give some slack? Is there someone we need to be generous to? Is there someone we need to invite to Alpha, or the Marriage Class, Parenting Class, youth group, Grief Share, DivorceCare, or Easter.

And if we are too busy with activities, then the Temple courtyards of our lives are way too cluttered, and Jesus is saying to us all today, "Get back to the main thing."

Jesus says, "I bring you the presence of God. In Me you will find meaning. In Me you will find fulfillment."

And by giving to others you will receive for Jesus said:

Mark 8:35 For those who [only] want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Mark 8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Mark 8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

This Palm Sunday and this Easter week, may this be a time when we come to grips with the meaning that Jesus offers to come into our hearts. If the presence of Christ is in us, may we reach out to others and share His love.

And on Easter weekend, for those who realize this Jesus is truly the King and a loving Lord who gave His life for us, we have a chance to be baptized during the service. And for those who want to rededicate their lives with a renewal of baptismal vows, we will have time in the service for that too as the pastors will have stations up front to receive and baptize all who desire that as a mark of faith or a renewal of commitment.

As Jesus came to the Temple twice to overthrow our tables, maybe for some a renewal of baptismal commitment with water and a pastor is what we need to do too. May this be one of the best, life-changing Easters in our lives for the King has come.

I am going you to do something different. I am going to ask you to take out a pen and write a note in your bulletin in the sermon note area or in some margin one take-away from the sermon that you think God wants you to respond to this week. Let's have a moment of silence as we respond in writing one action item.