

Church-olatry and the Temple of True Religion

Jeremiah 7:11; John 2:13-22

What is the role of the church in the greening of our faith? When does it aid in the growth of our faith? And when is it a hinderance? Today's sermon is a kind of sleight of hand. I'm going to talk about why I love the church and about the danger of making an idol of it.

The church can be our entryway into a living faith and into a beloved community with whom we can walk in our faith journey. But worshipping church can stifle our faith in God.

Our texts today from Jeremiah and John have to do with Jesus' cleansing of the temple and how we can find the temple of true religion.

I

First, lets' look at Jeremiah's warning and instruction: It's about true religion and worship *of* the temple. We can worship the house of God and yet ignore God's commands on how to live, especially how we are to treat those in our midst called the least of these.

I wonder how young Jesus was when he first heard this passage from Jeremiah read aloud in his Nazareth synagogue? Somewhere along the line, this

passage became formative in his understanding of the true place of the temple in the religious life. And he saw the same kind of religious corruption in his own day as Jeremiah had faced.

“Do not trust”, Jeremiah said, “in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’”. Jeremiah was talking about those who would worship the temple itself as if the temple were a kind of magic rabbit’s foot, a guarantee of safety, a proof of true faith.

But God says through Jeremiah: “Amend your ways and let me dwell with you.” It’s a tender plea from God to God’s people, “Let me dwell with you.” Then God describes what those amended ways would look like:

For if you truly amend your ways and doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien (the immigrant), the orphan and the widow, if you do not shed innocent blood.... Then I will dwell with you in this place.

Then God turns it up: “Will you break all Ten Commandments and come to the temple and say, ‘We are safe?’”. Then the last searing question: “Has this house which is called by my name become a den of thieves?!”

No wonder the king ordered him lowered by ladder into a deep, muddy inescapable cistern in order to shut him up!

II

So now we come to John's account of Jesus' cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem. In John's gospel, it happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Matthew, Mark and Luke place it in the last week of Jesus life. Whose account is right? Raymond Brown, the great John scholar, suggests that both might have happened: an early trip to Jerusalem, when Jesus made a prophetic utterance attacking what the temple had become and prophesying its destruction, and *also* a trip in Jesus' last days, when he went into the temple and drove out the moneychangers.

John wants to let us know that Jesus' opposition to the corruption of the temple began early in his ministry. And, by the way, Jesus was not alone in that opposition. The Essene community, from whom we've gotten the Dead Sea Scrolls, had made the same charges decades before.

John's rendering of the scene seems more violent than the others. John says Jesus made a kind of whip—in the temple weapons were forbidden—probably out of the broom straw that was there for the animals, and began to sweep the money changers and animals out of the temple. He said “Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” In Sunday School recently, Chris Brown spoke about the “industry of religion”. It can become that, a money-making factory, a corporation as vulnerable to corruption as any other corporation.

In John's gospel there's next a conversation between Jesus, his disciples, and those looking on.

Jesus talks about the destruction of the temple, but he points to a truer temple, the temple of his body, which will be destroyed but which will be also be raised. The disciples knew the danger he was in. They remembered the verse of scripture "Zeal for your house will consume me." They saw that Jesus' zeal for the temple to be the true temple would lead to the temple of his body being destroyed.

Often in John's gospel, Jesus has conversations with people who are stuck in the literal—like with Nicodemus, who asked about being born again "How can a person enter a second time in to his mother's womb?"—while Jesus was speaking metaphorically. The confused onlookers at the temple were focused on the literal, physical temple, Jesus on a spiritual temple. Sometimes we get confused in the same way.

III

Today we might say: the temple of true religion is not a brick and mortar thing, but a spiritual thing. Paul's favorite image of the church was the church as the Body of Christ. As Christ dwells in us, we become his hands and feet, Christ knitting us together as one body.

Somedays we are those hands and feet, somedays not. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Jungian analyst and author of *Women Who Run with Wolves*, wrote about the “church beneath the church”, which is the one that keeps her coming back to church. There’s the church above, the brick and mortar, the pews and pulpit, the bible and altar, the liturgy and table. But there’s also the church beneath the church, she says, where love reigns, and joy and compassion flow. That’s true religion. I love the church above, but I love the church beneath the church even more.

III

How does church-olatry, the worship of church, manifest itself? In a loyalty to the church that is greater than our loyalty to God and to Christ. We see church-olatry sometimes in the worship of the traditions of the church. Tradition can be life-giving, and it can be a spiritually deadening thing. The Greek word for tradition means to pass-along, to pass along to others what has been passed to us. It’s a verb, “traditioning”. Sometimes we pass along the good things, but we can pass along things that are not so good, or no longer life-giving. Good traditioning is passing along what is life-giving.

During the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped form the Confessing Church, which broke away from German Christian church which was in thrall to Hitler. And Bonhoeffer was part of a Confessing Church community living and

worshipping together. He wrote about that community in a book called *Life Together*. In it he warns us preachers and those he called “zealous members” who, instead of being thankful for their Christian community, complained about it to God and others.

The core problem, he said, was one of idolatry, what he called our “wish-dream” for the church. Pastors and church leaders can have a “wish-dream” which they seek to impose on their churches, and when the church does not live up to their “wish-dream”, they become frustrated, critical. Their affection for the church dries up. Bonhoeffer said that our wish-dreams need to fall like a vase from a mantel and be shattered. And we should give thanks to God for the shattering! Only then can we work together in gratitude for the church we have.¹

Carlyle Marney once said, “In pursuit of the perfect church I almost missed the one I had.” We can find ourselves there.

IV

What do we do with our disappointment about the church, our despair about it? The church has sometimes sinned grievously and injured people. It may have injured some of us. What do we do with our anger at the church, both the institutional church and our own church, the church we belong to, or once belonged to?

There was a man, a friend, in a former church. He had been a devoted Catholic, but he grew angry and despairing about what the church had done, what it had become.

He told me about going on a Catholic retreat which became a healing turnaround. During the retreat, he talked to the priest in charge of the retreat about his feelings about the church, his wounds and his anger. The priest said, “Dennis, you may need to forgive the church”. My friend did, and the terrible burden that ate at his soul was lifted.

Do you need to forgive the church? The institution of the church, the church you used to belong to? This church?

I wonder if there's a sacrament for our forgiving of the church, or if we could create one? Imagine: making a list of all the ways you've been hurt by the church, or angered by its flaws and sins, all your deep disappointments. We would write them on a piece of paper and then burn them, offering the ashes to God as a sign of our forgiving the church and our own healing.

What if we would do this in church, and before we burned our lists, the minister, priest, or pastor would say: “As a representative of the church, I must say, I am sorry. We were wrong, did wrong.” Maybe healing would come within us and among us.

V

I love the church in all its forms. I've been unusually blessed. The church for the most part has been life-giving to me, and I've devoted my life to its flourishing.

Somedays it has driven me to distraction, or, as the Southern expression goes, "gotten on my final nerve". *But the church has been where I've learned Jesus, found life-giving community, where worship has touched me in the deepest places, where I've been trained to make a better world.*

It's a human institution with a divine mission—and I love it, warts and all. Paul wrote that we are like cracked clay pots, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels". Imagine: God has entrusted to us fallible creatures the treasure of the gospel, and to the fallible, crackable clay pot of a church the treasure of the gospel!

After I left Myers Park Baptist, I was churchless for the first time in my life. I found a beautiful spiritual home, first at St. Peter's Episcopal, then at Caldwell Presbyterian. They nourished my soul.

I began teaching religion at Johnson C. Smith University. It was there that I began to realize that being a pastor was my primary calling, not teaching. Also,

teaching had a steeper learning curve than I expected! Lesson plans!? “What is a syllabus, and you want it *when?!?*”

I was teaching at Johnson C. Smith when I began as your interim pastor. I discovered that I liked writing sermons more than preparing lectures, and I missed the pastoral connection with a church, sharing in the joys and sorrows of its common life.

My vocation as a minister has always been based on my love of the church, and my affection for it, even in its sometimes challenging humanness. We humans are all God has to work with!

VI

The church is a community of grace and peace fashioned by God to tell God’s good news and to embody the love of Christ.

Yes, the story of the church through the centuries has been a place of shadow and light, a confounding mixture of faith and unfaith, like Peter, one moment a rock of faith and the next a series of shabby denials. The church has been the object of much praise and scorn through the centuries, but in truth it has been both far better and far worse than its critics know it to be.

Sometimes it has been Christ’s face, other times Christ’s betrayer, a mockery of his name and face.

But here's the miracle: God in God's steadfast love has been sure on God's promise that the Living Christ would be with us always, and this steadfast love and grace has resulted in the true church being present somewhere in all places in and in all times.

God says to us, "Let me dwell with you." And we say, "Yes, please!" God asks, "Will you be my true church?" And say, "We want to be, with all our hearts, we want to be".

Amen

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1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (N.Y.: Harper&Row, 1954), 27-30.