

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 12, 2006

Jesus Has Left the Building
Mark 12:38-44

When one of the church staff saw my sermon title,
 "Jesus Has Left the Building",
 he accused me of plagiarism.
I said at least I changed one of the key words.
If you happen to be unfamiliar with this phrase,
 you'll need to know that the original form of this famous saying is,
 "Ladies and Gentlemen, Elvis has left the building."

Speaking of plagiarism,
 most of the Pittsburghers who know this saying
 will want to attribute these words to Mike Lange,
 the announcer for Penguins hockey games.
This is one of about 30 phrases he likes to use in announcing games,
 and I'm told he uses this one when something good happened,
 as when a goal was scored, or the game was almost won.

Well, Pittsburghers, I'm sorry to burst our bubble,
 but this saying is older than Mike Lange.
It was first used in 1954 by Horace Lee Logan,
 "founder and longtime producer of *Louisiana Hayride*,
 the country-music radio show that gave Elvis his big break."
Once Elvis had reached superstardom,
 he gave one last performance on *Hayride*,
 which was attended by thousands of teenage kids
 screaming at the top of their lungs.
"After Elvis had given his final encore and left the stage,
 the crowd headed for the exits,
 even though many other Hayride acts were still waiting to perform.
Logan took the microphone and pleaded with Elvis's fans
to return to their seats:
 'Please, young people . . . Elvis has left the building.
 He has gotten in his car and driven away. . . .
 Please take your seats.'

The words became part of the Elvis legend
 were repeated at many subsequent shows.
Now they're a catchphrase whose meaning is something like:
 the show's over, the curtain has fallen, the sun has set,

that's all she wrote, the fat lady has sung, time's up,
class dismissed, end of story"ⁱ

* * * * *

I couldn't resist this title
because it captures an element of today's gospel story
that might be easily missed:
After Jesus makes his observations at the Temple Treasury
warning against the scribes,
and lamenting the poverty of the widow,
he exits the Temple *for the final time*
before his crucifixion.

The gravity of the moment when
Jesus has left the building
depends in part on our interpretation of his words
about the scribes and the widow.
There two competing interpretations of this story
that get tossed around among biblical scholars.

One interpretation is that Jesus is criticizing the wealthy scribes
for making much of their piety in a self-serving way,
while he *praises* the poor widow for her wholehearted commitment
as evidenced by her sacrificial gift.

The other interpretation is that Jesus is not offering praise, but a lament.
Rather than praising the widow's sacrifice
Jesus is lamenting the religious system that would teach this woman
to offer her tiny coins to support the opulence of the temple
instead of using them to meet her most basic human needs.ⁱⁱ

In this sermon, I am taking the second view,
and understanding Jesus' words as a lament
and a denunciation of the injustice of this aspect of
"organized Judaism."

His lament is all the more striking
because it gives voice to his *last experience* of Temple worship
before his crucifixion.

When Jesus leaves the building, that is, the Temple,
he is preparing to "leave the building"
in the ultimate sense of that expression.
He leaves and will not return to the temple of his people

during his earthly life.
He makes a final break, which ends in his death
accomplished by the system he laments.

* * * * *

Given the significance of this moment,
as Jesus' last comment on what many people like to call
"organized religion",
it is worth taking a look at just what Jesus was lamenting,
just what he was denouncing about the scribes
and the wealthy benefactors of the temple,
and their relationship to the poor widow.

Mark offers a pretty extensive picture of these scribes,
most often characterizing them as those opposed
to Jesus' teaching and his way of life.

They frequently question Jesus

about his authority to forgive sins (2:6)

about eating with sinners and tax collectors (2:16)

about eating with defiled hands (7:1, 5)

about the source of his authority (11:27)

about the greatest commandment (12:28, 32)

They accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul, or Satan (3:22)

They will be part of those who reject Jesus (8:31; 10:33)

They argue with Jesus' disciples (9:14)

They eventually seek to arrest and kill Jesus (11:18; 14:1, 43, 53; 15:1)

Finally, they mock Jesus on the cross (15:31)ⁱⁱⁱ

Clearly, from the perspective of the Gospel of Mark,
these scribes (all men by the way)
are clearly NOT the ones we want to emulate.

(There is one exception to this:

the scribe who agrees with Jesus about what's really important;
namely, loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.)

So, what kind of religiosity is Jesus denouncing?

Let's listen to Jesus' warning:

Beware of the scribes,

who like to walk around in long robes,

and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

and to have the best seats in the synagogues,

and places of honor at banquets!

Let's just start with this preacher being honest:

This description makes me a bit uncomfortable
as one trained and ordained by organized religion,
as one who stands before you in a long robe,
and sits in a high backed chair at the front of the room,
(on of the few comfortable ones in this room)
and who is, for the most part, greeted with respect by you,
(unless you know me well,
in which case you're more likely
to greet me with a wise-crack.)

But it is not so much the externals that Jesus is pointing to
as the condition of the heart that these externals betray.

Here Jesus decries a spirituality of self-importance.

The kind of religion by which the practitioners
engage in self-aggrandizement,
enhancing their own image in the eyes of others,
in their own eyes, and they hope, in the eyes of God,
and doing so at the great expense of others.

Those who engage in this kind of religion,
usually see the world in absolute, black-and-white terms,
are concerned with defining fundamentals
and standards of purity,
as a way of showing who's in and who's out;
they are usually quite comfortable with the very convenient notion
that out of the multitude of religious and moral perspectives
held by many honest and intelligent people in the world,
that they *just happened*, by Providence, of course,
to be born into a family that practices THE right version,
of THE one true religion.

Others of this persuasion may be recent converts,
and they are very thankful that God has revealed to them
what so many others seem unable or unwilling to see.

They congratulate themselves on owning this truth,
and they join with their new brothers (and, they believe, with God)
in condemning any and all who see things differently than they do,
and are quite sure these lost souls will be sent to hell
for their blindness, weakness and stupidity.

As I look out at the world of religion today,
I cannot see much difference between the attitude of the scribes,
and most of American fundamentalism,
and, I'm sorry to say,
a growing segment of American evangelicalism.

Adding to this sense of self-importance,
Jesus condemns the scribes either for their lack of awareness
or compassion, or both,
in that the economic system that makes them rich
causes the poverty of the widow.

*They devour widow's houses,
and for the sake of appearances say long prayers.*

The sad irony in this situation,
is that this form of organized religion
pays more attention to rules of purity, and outward appearances,
that neither add to nor take away from the quality of human life,
and hardly any attention to the economic arrangements
that benefit them at the expense of the most vulnerable
members of society.

An example today might be the politician I heard recently,
who in making his concession speech after losing the election,
pandered to his religious constituents,
saying that he had fought for
"the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society:"
And who did he name as the most vulnerable members?
the unborn and the terminally ill.

That is, in good scribal fashion,
he was priding himself on his stance on two moral issues
lifted up by his brand of organized religion today:
abortion and euthanasia,
while ignoring, in his speech and in his legislative career,
the needs of the millions of people
who are living somewhere between birth and death
without two cents to save toward a loaf of bread.

A scribe would want us to believe
that these poor widows, and sons of widows,
don't have two cents to spend because they are lazy
and have not availed themselves of the great opportunities
granted by this great country of ours.

Now, I'll be the last to argue that the unborn and the terminally ill
are not vulnerable.

But do they represent the "most vulnerable" ?
Or the most pressing issue of human suffering
presented to us in modern times?

Or might we need to look at the multitudes of fatherless children
in our inner cities,
or the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees,

whose homes and livelihood have been sucked into
the vortex of violence we have helped to create in Iraq,
or the thousands of U.S. soldiers we pray for every week?

One modern day poet laments with Jesus, using these words:

*You were pretty as a picture
It was all there to see
Then your face caught up with your psychology
With a mouth full of teeth
You ate all your friends
And you broke every heart thinking every heart mends
You speak of signs and wonders
But I need something other
I would believe if I was able
But I'm waiting on the crumbs from your table
Where you live should not decide
Whether you live or whether you die
Three to a bed
Sister Ann, she said
Dignity passes by^v*

On his way out of the Temple, Jesus says of this scribal arrogance,
They will receive the greater condemnation.

Lest you think I'm being too political here, or even possibly partisan.
Let me say, as clearly as I can,
that while I most certainly do not believe that God is a Republican,
neither do I believe God is a Democrat.
If the Republicans have too easily assumed and acted as if
their God is the only true God,
the Democrats have too easily assumed and acted as if
the world would be better off with NO reference to God.
Not only are both of these extremes a betrayal of the gospel of Christ,
I happen to believe they are both betrayals
of the American Constitution.
The advice of this Independent preacher,
would be that both parties can learn something from this text.
Conservatives about the arrogance of their religion,
and Liberals about their squeamishness about religion
which has allowed the hard-line, right-wingers
to define the religious agenda for our country.

* * * * *

When organized religion, of whatever brand,
falls into self-serving patterns,
and begins to focus on religious rules
that give some power over others,
or that provide for religious superiority
while ignoring the basic human needs of the inferior,
this text suggest that Jesus "leaves that building."

But, the good news is this:

Jesus may have left the building,
but he did not get in his car and drive away,
never to return to the *Louisiana Hayride*.

Rather, he left in order to return,
and to redeem these corrupt forms of organized religion.

Whenever Jesus leaves the building of our religion,
he always returns to stand at the door and knock.

And the choice is ours.

We can open the door, and let Jesus in.
Or perhaps we need to follow Jesus out,
out into the world where we can begin to see
the widows, the orphans, the homeless, the marginalized,
the desperate, the lonely, be they the clinically depressed,
the self-medicated, the unemployed,
or the closeted, gay clergymen...
people so alone they feel they must end their lives
rather than face the sensational ridicule
of a heartless religious culture.

Now, today is Consecration Sunday.

And I really do hope that you, who live in relative abundance,
will give with grateful hearts, out of your abundance
to the work of Christ through this church.

And if you are one who has to choose between utilities and medication,
I hope that you will keep your money
and spend it on your basic needs.

But I also hope that we will let this story shake us all
into a more critical view of our own religious perspectives,
lest we become self-deceived and calcified into something
that no longer resonates with the heart of God.

Has Jesus left the building?
We ought to ask that question every time we gather.
Where is Jesus today. Who is he watching? Who is he loving?
Who does he want us to love and how?
And if we discover that Jesus has indeed left our building,
then let's open the door ask him back in
to break bread with us,
and teach us again how to walk in his way.

ⁱ Cecil Adams, www.straightdope.com, 27-Dec-2002

ⁱⁱ Perkins, *Mark*, The New Interpreter's Bible; Addison G. Wright, "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament? -- A Matter of Context," *CBCQ*, 44 (1982) 256-65; Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*, p. 262, 321.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian Stoffregen, Email Notes on "Mark 12:38-44", November 2, 2006.

^{iv} Bono, "Crumbs From Your Table", *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, Universal Music, 2004