

Open the Doors!

Matthew 21:11-16

Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I remember my last visit with my father. He lived in Texas, and I was in Massachusetts, so we only got to see each other a couple of times a year. I knew his health was failing, so I made an extra visit that year, a few weeks before he died.

My dad told old me family stories, going back generations, stories I had heard before and longed to hear again. We talked about Dad's work, about the trips he had made around the world for his company, the things he had seen. We shared memories of my childhood. We watched VHS tapes of old movies together, played way too loud. We shared meals. I cleaned his house. I washed his feet.

That visit was such a gift to me. I knew this was probably going to be the last time I saw him. I think he knew it, too. But we couldn't speak of it to one another. The knowing was too tender. Yet every moment of that week felt sacred to me as it was happening because I knew it was the last. The memories feel sacred still.

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Today's scripture is about Jesus' last week – his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his actions there in the face of his approaching death. Everything he does and says carries a heightened importance because it is his last opportunity to be with loved ones, to share a meal, to teach, and to act. And so, he begins his last week with three prophetic acts – actions that are imbued with symbolic meaning, actions we are supposed to remember precisely because they come at the end of Jesus' life, and he knows it. The three prophetic acts are Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his disruption of the Temple, and his cursing of a fig tree for not bearing fruit. For the next few minutes, I want to focus on the middle one – Jesus' disruption of the Temple.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that immediately after the procession into Jerusalem, Jesus goes to the Temple. He goes to the Court of the Gentiles, where stalls are set up under the porticos for those who sell animals for Temple sacrifice and those who change pilgrims' money into the proper coinage for Temple offerings, all according to the law. The fact that they are conducting this business within the Temple itself angers Jesus, so he drives out the money changers and the vendors – AND their customers! He overturns their tables and runs them all out. God's house is to be a house of prayer, Jesus says. Go do your business outside, not in here.

Then Jesus does something that we really need to pay attention to, because it is also a symbolic act, because he chooses to do it right at the end of his life. It is one of those last acts that has heightened, sacred significance. After Jesus runs the bankers and merchants out of the Temple courtyard, a bunch of people who are

blind and people who are lame come in, and he heals them. Notice that we don't hear about people with skin diseases or evil spirits entering the Temple at this point. Just those who are blind and lame.

If you were a Jew living in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, you would understand the significance of this healing act immediately, but the rest of us require a hint, a key, about these verses: The blind and the lame enter the Temple and are healed, and the children call Jesus the Son of David. This would immediately remind people in Jesus' day of the story of the Great King David, so let's review.

We read in 2 Samuel that a thousand years before Jesus, King David conquered Jerusalem and made it the capital of a United Kingdom of Israel. It wasn't at all certain that he would be able to conquer the city. In fact, as King David's army advanced, he was heckled along the way. They shouted, "Even the blind and the lame will keep you out!" David was really angry at this taunt.

The hecklers had a point. Jerusalem was very well defended, with strong, high walls. David was finally able to conquer it only when he snuck his army in through the storm drains. When the battle was over, and David ruled the city at last, he remembered what the hecklers had said, that even the blind and the lame could keep him out of Jerusalem. And King David declared that, henceforth, "the blind and the lame shall not come into this house." It was a famous restriction. Jews knew about this.

So then, a thousand years later, along comes Jesus, David's descendant, the one the crowds call the Son of David. At the very end of his life, Jesus enters the city on a donkey, as the embodiment of all the old prophesies. Then he goes to the Temple and chases out the buyers and sellers there. And immediately, he begins to welcome the blind and the lame and he offers them a healing touch.

I think Jesus wanted us to remember everything he did during his earthly life. But the things he chose to do at the end, those have a special importance for us. Jesus' actions tell us: God's house is for welcome and for healing and for prayer.

Jesus upends more than tables that day. He upends everything that people think they understand about who is worthy of welcome. And Jesus does all this upending with the authority of God's own self.

This upsets the religious leaders, of course. "Who do you think you are?" the religious leaders ask.

"The little children know me," Jesus responds.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, he knows he is going there to die, to be killed in a brutal way, to be betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends. He could be forgiven for turning inward that week, spending it in prayer and meditation. But that is not what Jesus does. He uses one of his last, short, remaining days to embody God's welcome for all. It is a sacred act at a sacred time.

"Tear down the barriers!" Jesus says. Open up God's house to all! Let life breathe through this place! God's Spirit cannot be contained by earthly rules or locked doors. All are welcome here. Especially those who have been excluded. Especially those who need healing. Welcome to all who are knocking at the door.

God's love is so great that we cannot possibly imagine it. It is laughable for us to think that we could put walls around it. How much better to let God's love flow through us to everyone. How much better to throw the doors open and shout "Come on in! This place is already filled with folks who are blind or lame in one way or another, with those who need healing and forgiveness and love. So come join us!"

Thanks be to God for open doors and open hearts! Thanks be to God!

Amen