WHEN JESUS COMES TO CHURCH
Luke 19:45-48

A Sunday School teacher asked her fifth grade class if they knew Jesus’ first recorded words after He rose from the dead. A kid raised his hand and blurted out, “Surprise!”

In spite of the fact, that Jesus had told His disciples on at least three occasions that He would go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed by them, and then rise again, it was still quite a surprise when Jesus rose from the grave. But before the joy of resurrection, there was one tense week of ministry in Jerusalem that culminated with the sound of hammers striking nails, bones cracking, grown men screaming, and women crying. Before the resurrection there was the cross. And in that last week in Jerusalem, Jesus didn’t hide out behind some locked door; He engaged people—people who were for Him and people who were against Him. He acted. He taught. He wept. He ministered. He prayed. He made the most of those few days before Friday. And as we prepare our hearts for Resurrection Sunday we’re going to look at a few passion week “Snapshots of the Savior” to help get us ready.

I invite you to open your Bible this morning to Luke 19:45-48.

When Franklin Roosevelt was President, though he had some affiliation with St. Thomas Church and, of course, the National Cathedral, he really preferred to attend the much smaller St. John’s Church. It troubled Roosevelt that tourists would attend a certain church simply because they believed they’d get a chance to see the President. There’s an apocryphal story about a phone call made to the rector at St. John’s Church: “Will the President be in attendance at worship this Sunday?” asked the caller. The rector replied, “I don’t know, but I can assure you that Jesus will be here, and that should be good enough.”

We expect Jesus to come to church, don’t we? We invoke His presence. We want Him in our midst. We invite Him to make himself known among us every Sunday. But we forget how dangerous it can be when Jesus shows up. Hear the word of the Lord … (read the text).
**Did you hear about the little boy who saw a tent in a field?** He was just sure it was a circus, so he went over to it, crawled up under the flap, and experienced a huge disappointment—it was no circus under that tent, it was a revival meeting. Years later, as an adult, at a time when he was really hurting and looking for answers, he went into a church hoping to find a revival meeting. Still another disappointment—he found a circus instead. That seemed to be Jesus’ experience in our text.

On His march to the cross Jesus finally made it to Jerusalem. And the people there were glad to have him. They all but gave Him the key to the city. Crowds were shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" It was quite a spectacle. All that was missing were the blaring siren of the lead patrol car and the Shriners on their motorcycles cutting figure eights behind it. This whole Jesus parade was loaded with messianic overtones. The Pharisees got it, and they were insisting that Jesus tell His disciples to knock it off. “Them or the stones,” said Jesus. “If the people hush their mouths, the stones will do the praising.”

Had Jesus been a politician He would have seized the moment. His approval rating would never be higher. Now was the time to press His agenda. He was as close to a mandate as he was ever going to get. We almost expect to see Him on some podium, grinning from ear to ear, standing before Israel’s flag, both hands raised in victory signs.

But Jesus was no politician. In spite of all the praise, Jesus found little to smile about on this day. The crowd rejoiced, and Jesus wept. He knew the crowd didn’t get it. They were looking for a political Messiah; Jesus was a suffering One. So they missed Him. Jerusalem had a golden opportunity and it slipped through her fingers like water through a sieve. Now death and destruction loomed large in Jerusalem’s future. Jesus saw it all. It ripped out His heart. So He wept.

But He didn’t spend all day in tears. He went up to the temple. If the people had known their Bibles they wouldn’t have been surprised by this move. The prophet said it would happen. They must have heard it read in synagogue a hundred times. It was the word of the Lord through Malachi (Mal. 3:1-2):

> And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming,
says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap.

In other words, He’s going to burn up all the garbage and clean up all the trash. Jesus went straight to the temple. Maybe He was hoping to find a revival meeting, but what He found was a circus. There in the Court of the Gentiles, the one and only place in the temple complex where Gentiles could come and worship the one true God, Jesus saw something akin to the game lane at a county fair carnival. Carnies barking out their appeal, begging passers-by to play their game.

“Step right up and shoot for prizes. Win your girl a teddy bear!”

“Let me guess your weight. If I’m wrong, you win.”

“Throw the hoops over the bottles. Big prizes! Everybody wins!”

How could God-fearing Gentiles ever worship God in chaos like that? And how could devout Jews who came to the temple to worship keep a heart of worship in the midst of that circus? This was the week of Passover. Thousands of Jews flocked to Jerusalem from miles around just to worship in the temple during those holy days. The crowd was thicker than ants at a picnic. And in the midst of such hustle and bustle, the priests were selling animals, changing money, and making a mint off the would-be worshipers.

Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, and purchase yourself a first-class animal for your sacrifice. We’re your full service supplier. Need pigeons, doves, oxen or lambs? You need it—we’ve got it. And check out our blue-light special on doves. For today and today only, buy two, get one free. And all our stock has been pre-inspected by the priests and declared without blemish.

Above the noise, another voice is heard: Over here for animal inspection. Animal inspection over here. Law says you can’t offer a sacrifice with a blemish or defect. If you travelers brought your own animals, you must get them inspected before you sacrifice. Step right up and for a small fee we will make sure your animal meets the requirements. Animal inspection over here.
And still another voice shouts in the confusion: *Money-changing!* *Money-changing!* You can't pay temple tax with Caesar's coins. Our coins for yours—only a small handling fee. *Money-changing!* *Money-changing!* Step right up and get it done.

So Jesus didn’t find any revival meeting at the temple; He found a circus.

And man, did that ever light His fuse! You’d be hard pressed to find any other occasion in the Gospels where Jesus was as angry as He was in the temple that day. A composite picture from the Gospels tells the story. Jesus twisted together a whip of cords and started cracking it like Indiana Jones. He tossed tables and made a wreck of their marketplace. And those merchants scattered like billiard balls after a good break. Sheep and oxen bleating and lowing and running loose. Pigeons and doves fluttering off to the sky. Coins clinking on the rock floor, spinning and rolling around. Children hiding behind their mamas’ skirts. The collective gasps of a multitude of people. And what just a few moments before was a noisy, bustling, place became still and quiet in the presence of Jesus. With all eyes focused on Him, Jesus took two Bible texts and preached a sermon in a sentence: *"My house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers."*

Luke understates the action in his account—probably as a means to highlight Jesus’ words. Jesus preached Isaiah: *"my house will be a house of prayer."* And He preached Jeremiah: *"you have made it a den of robbers."* And His sermon got mixed reviews. The rank and file gave Him a thumbs-up and came back for more. Luke writes that they *"hung on his words."* But the religious leaders gave Him a thumbs-down: they tried to figure out a way to kill Him. But their scheming didn’t intimidate Jesus one bit. Luke tells us that He came back to the temple every day to teach.

Jesus had judged the temple, cleansed the temple. He was trying to set it right. But it was too late for the temple system. So Jesus’ work that day was like patching the seat of your pants for the umpteenth time; the patch wouldn’t hold, it wouldn’t last because the pants were worn out and used up. And besides, Jesus was the new pair of pants Israel needed far more than making the temple right again. Jesus wasn’t pleased with what He found at the temple that day. I wonder what He’d think if he showed up at church today.
Would He grab a whip and rearrange a few things? It doesn’t take much for a church to get off course, to become as twisted up as the temple had become in Jesus’ day. The Jewish temple was not the only outpost of God’s people that ever lost its way. Today’s churches sometimes do as well. We could lose our way if we’re not careful.

We could easily turn the church into a club—membership reserved for people just like us, lots of activities just for us, a numbness and indifference to the lost world that surrounds us.

Or we could turn the church into an Alamo—a place where we circle the wagons and hide within our walls from a threatening and hostile world, taking the posture that it’s us against them. Just hunker down and hope to ride out the storm in safety.

We could turn the church into a theater—a place for a little religious entertainment and a nice show on Sunday, a place where people are wowed by performers rather than wooed by Christ.

And in our capitalist culture we always have to be careful not to turn the church into a business—a place focused on expansion and growth and financing to the neglect of worship and mission and ministry.

We could make the church pretty much anything we want. But it’s not about us; it’s about Christ. It’s about what He wants the church to be. And when we get it wrong, we can only pray that Jesus will come to us and make it right again.

III

In our text, Jesus gives us some pretty good clues as to how we are to be right and stay right as a church. We learn what Jesus looks for when He comes to church.

When Jesus comes to church, He expects to find an open door. One of the things that chapped Jesus when He came to the temple was that the Gentiles were being shut out. Their access to God in the temple was turned into a marketplace. They were absolutely shut out. We best never forget that
the church is one of those rare organizations that exists for people who are not even members. To be that we have to be a church of the open door.

Let’s do it by loving those outside of the church—all those outside of the church. Every now and then, when I invite someone to church the person says, “I wouldn’t fit in there. I don’t have the right clothes. I don’t make enough money.” And I respond, “Come see us. We’ve got a pretty rich diversity of people in the church—some dress up, some don’t; some have money, some don’t; but we’re not about fashion and we’re not about money. We’re about Christ. You can find a place here. You will be welcomed and you will be loved.” Just recently I was talking with someone who has been visiting the church. She told me after their first visit to Sunday School, her kids were so excited. “Mama,” they said, “the other kids talked to me.” What we take for granted doesn’t always happen in every church. So we can’t take it for granted. We have to work at it, nurture it, and bless it. And when we do, others are blessed. And not only do we open doors, God opens hearts to the gospel. Churches with an open door stand ready to invite and welcome anyone God sends our way … even if it makes us a little uncomfortable. We seek them and we welcome them—the stranger, the outcast, the down and out, the up and out, the sinner and the tax collector. We welcome them and seek to love them to Jesus.

And when people come through our doors, we must be willing to include them in our circle of relationships. Every church, including this one has to work against being cliquey. It’s too easy to get our own little circle and close it down to new faces. We are a very friendly church—guests tell me that all that time, and that is a wonderful thing. But we need to work on moving beyond friendliness to acceptance, beyond inviting people to including people. We can do it by making conversation with people we don’t know. We can invite new people into our circles of fellowship. We can keep our antennas up to notice those who appear alone, and invite them to sit with us in worship. We can open up our homes to others. There’s a lot we can do to include people. Don’t wait for others to take the first step toward you; you take the first step toward them. You just might be claiming someone for God’s kingdom, and you just might be making a lifelong friend. When we don’t include people, we are shutting people out. That’s not good. That’s closing the door rather than opening it.

And in an effort to open the door more widely, we’re in prayer and discussion among our leadership to add a second Sunday School to our
Sunday morning schedule. We’ll give you plenty of notice and seek your input as we move closer to this happening, but we’re maxed out in our Sunday School space. Just as adding a second morning worship back in 1996 helped us see immediate growth by opening another door, so God can use a second Sunday School to do the same. We don’t want to get in God’s way of adding to His church here because we would be inconvenienced by adding another Sunday School opportunity. We are not about numbers here. We are about Christ and about people. More people means more salvations, more discipleship, more partners in the mission of the church, more resources to invest in God’s kingdom. And it means an open door. When Jesus comes to church he expects to find an open door. And if not, He may break it down.

When Jesus comes to church He expects to find a house of prayer. In our text, Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 56:7 where God wants people to find joy in His house of prayer. Churches will never be what God wants them to be without a commitment to prayer. Prayer reminds us that we do not depend on ourselves but on God. Prayer humbles us. Prayer turns us toward our Father God. Prayer turns our eyes to Jesus rather than to our circumstances or our problems. Prayer calls on Holy Spirit power rather than our own. Prayer fills us up with God. So many times, churches "have not because they ask not" (Js. 4:2). Prayer is the key.

All kinds of prayer—praise and thanksgiving, confession, praying for others, praying for the church, praying for the world. And not a few little polite prayers either—the kind of prayer that one man described as little more than a starting pistol that shoots blanks—good for getting things going and wrapping things up but that’s about it.¹ Not that kind of prayer. But extraordinary prayer. Prayer from the heart. Prayer with passion. Prayer with purpose. Prayer with faith. A church without that kind of prayer is a church without power.

We could use a lot more of that kind of praying around here. A small group of our deacons gather with me for prayer on Wednesday night. We often have some folks who pray during our services. But I fear too many of our prayers are tied up in the starting things off and wrapping things up mode. We can do better. We can do better in our Sunday School classes. Instead of spending ten minutes taking prayer requests and two minutes praying, let’s

¹This image borrowed from Eugene H. Peterson, Working the Angles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 32.
reverse that. We can do better on Wednesday nights—and we’ve made progress moving our prayers beyond just gall bladders and kidney stones to kingdom issues and church needs and lost people and missionaries and God’s work in our world. Perhaps some of you could get together now and then just to pray for the church and God’s kingdom in the world. We could pray for God to send revival to the church and to our nation. Let’s be a house of prayer.

Charles Finney, one of the great evangelists during the Second Great Awakening understood this. Daniel Nash became Finney’s prayer partner for his crusades. Father Nash, as some called him, would slip into town three or four weeks before Finney’s arrival, rent a room, find two or three other like-minded Christians to join him, and then do nothing but plead with God to send revival to that town. Though Nash was seldom seen, over time people began to recognize that Finney and Nash were equal threats to wickedness in a community. That’s why in one town in 1826, a mob burned effigies of both men in an attempt to keep them away. Finney and Nash shared a team ministry. And within four months after Nash’s death, Finney left evangelism and became a pastor. His partner in cracking the gates of hell was gone. It’s not just organization and preaching—to register maximum impact, all that stuff has to be soaked in prayer. Nash did that for Finney. Nash is buried in northern New York near the Canadian border. His tombstone says it all: “Daniel Nash, Laborer with Finney, Mighty in Prayer.”

Let’s be people of prayer. Let’s pray for this church. Let’s pray for her leaders. Let’s pray for one another. Let’s pray for God’s will. Let’s bathe everything we say and do in the power of prayer. Let’s be such a praying church that historians will say of us: “First Baptist Church, Laborer with God, Mighty in Prayer.” God calls us to be a people of prayer, and when Jesus comes to church He expects to find a house of prayer.

But that’s not all. When Jesus comes to church, He expects to find the gospel truth. While it’s important that the church teach the truth about social issues like abortion and homosexuality, while it’s important that we teach racial equality, and teach God’s care for the widow and the orphan and the poor, it’s most important that we teach the gospel. That’s what saves. That’s what’s unique about our faith. That’s what makes us Christians instead of moralists. Did you notice in our text that after Jesus cleansed the temple, He

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2Jim Cymbala with Dean Merrill, Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 174-176.
came back every day and did His teaching there?  A prime mission of the church is to teach the truth. We live in a day when Pilate's question to Jesus is a common question of many: "What is truth?" In a talk show society there is no truth, there is only opinion. Our society operates on the idea that we just sort of get everybody together and argue about our opinions. You know, one opinion is as good as another. "There is no absolute truth," says our culture. "What's true for you may or may not be true for me." Well, that's pure nonsense and illogical: two contradictory views on the same issue can't both be true. There is absolute truth—God's truth. And it's the responsibility of the church to open up the Bible and teach it.

Do you want to know the truth? Here are some things from God's Word that are absolutely true:

• Paul wrote: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). Now that is absolute truth.

• And so are these words from Jesus: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16).

• And here’s more truth from Jesus: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).

The church needs to teach the truth. Marilyn Dineen, a young woman from Edinboro, Pennsylvania, attended church on a Sunday just two days after science teacher John Gillette was murdered at a school dance by a 14-year-old boy nicknamed “Satan.” When asked about her church attendance, Dineen said, “I don’t usually come. But today I needed to be with people who believe in something.”³ May everyone who walks through our doors find us to be people who believe in more than “something”—may they find people who believe Jesus, people who believe the truth.

In a world of opinion, Jesus tells the truth. Jesus is the truth. And when He comes to church, He expects us to be teaching His truth as well.

³Quote from USA Today, April 27, 1998
IV

So ... what does Jesus see when He comes to this church? It would be easy to assume that all is well because God adds to our family most every Sunday. And yet, that’s precisely when it’s so easy to grow complacent, to lose our way and forget our mission. Argentinean pastor Juan Carlos Ortiz writes: "God began speaking to me about the condition of the church. He said that we were not growing. My reply was, 'Lord, we are growing. We have gone from 200 to 600 in two years.' And God said, 'You are not growing; you are just getting fat!'" Or as the late Baptist evangelist Vance Havner put it, "We may be many, but we ain't much."4

If we want to be many and much, and if we want this church to be pleasing to God and useful to God, if we want to grow and prosper and be a great blessing to God, to our community, and to the world, then let’s make this church what God wants it to be: an open door, a house of prayer, and a people that teach the gospel truth. God won’t call us to do something He won’t empower us to do, so let’s lay hold of Holy Spirit power and do it. And that way, when Jesus comes to this church, He will find a revival not a circus, and we will feel His blessing, not His wrath.

Preached: March 23, 2014
First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR
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