

## “Staying With It”

Luke 21: 5-19

It would be so easy to simply let this text be about the “end times” and how we as people of faith are called to prepare for them or rather, how not to prepare for them. Or, if truth be told, if we really didn’t like what Jesus was saying in this text, it would also be so easy for us to shrug our shoulders and say that this is the crazy part of the Bible, the part that we really don’t hold as Truth. And then we would be free to move on to other parts of the Bible that we like better than this crazy weird type of talk found in the Bible.

It really would be so easy to do all those things. However, we know that as people of faith, lesson number one is we don’t get to pick out what parts of the Bible we will follow and which parts we will not. It is either all Word of God or none of it is. So no matter how easy it would be to pick and chose, we know that as people of faith, we simply cannot do that when it comes to the Word of God.

So as much as we would like to move on or dismiss this text as something that doesn’t apply for us as people of God today, we simply cannot do that. Part of us growing in faith is struggling with the text, all the texts, and finding the Word of God in it for us as God’s children.

And when we do just that, we discover that this text tells us about Jesus' last public act of ministry, or at least his last public act that can be found in the Gospel of Luke. We are told at the end of this chapter that Jesus kept coming to the Temple each day to preach and teach and the people kept coming to the Temple to hear Jesus. But then in the very next chapter, first couple of lines, we learn that the high priests and religion scholars began looking for a way to do away with Jesus and they found that way through Judas Iscariot. The powers that be needed to get rid of Jesus because he was breaking down the system through his preachings and teachings, through his healings, and welcome. The system needed to silence Jesus because although technically the Temple and the religious system were still standing, Jesus was metaphorically tearing it down brick by brick with each life he transformed. Jesus was not welcome at the Temple all because he was cracking and crumbling that sure foundation that was partly created to help the people it was now failing.

In fact, the ironic thing about Jesus' relationship with the Temple was that the Temple was where Jesus belonged, simply because of who he was but it was the place he was most unwelcomed. Jesus was unwelcomed because not only did he see the corruption that surrounded the Temple, he spoke out against. Not only did Jesus see the pretentiousness of the Temple, he called people to live out a more simple faith and life. With each life he transformed Jesus made very apparent all

the ways the Temple was failing the people. Jesus was not welcomed at the Temple at all.

Well, we could argue that Jesus should have expected this. He did ministry a little differently than the Temple did. He met with people one on one, embracing people that were pushed to the margins, which is all well and good but surely Jesus knew his style of ministry wasn't going to be accepted with open arms by the systems and the powers that be.

But knowing all that, let's face it, we know that the unwelcoming attitude shown to Jesus by the Temple was devastating to him. After all, he was a faithful Jew. Jesus had been taken to the Temple when he was a baby and dedicated to God. He grew up going to the Temple with his parents on many occasions. Why, his first act of ministry happened in the church. Jesus stood up there at the pulpit, read a particular meaningful text that proclaimed the promise of God's Kingdom for all of God's children.

Why, we just know Jesus loved the church. It held all those special people in it for him, people who had watched him grow up, church ladies who had slipped him candy when Mary and Joseph wasn't watching, church men who had taken Jesus under his wing and helped him become the man he was today. Jesus was a church person through and through.

So you know it devastated him to actually verbalize the words that one day, the Temple would no longer be standing. It was his church, strong, secure, indestructible. Why would he say such a thing about such a beloved building and send everyone around into chaos?

What I came to realize this week was that Jesus was talking about something more than just bricks and mortar. Buildings crumble and crack, that's nothing new. Buildings are torn down so that new buildings can take their place, that's nothing new. Buildings fall down each and every day.

So what I realized is that at this point in Jesus' ministry, Jesus understood something we all tend to forget. We all know that we have these seemingly strong perceptions, and impenetrable images of the church and the community within the church but in reality, the church is just a building and within that building, the church is really made up of flawed human beings.

I think at this point in Jesus' ministry, when he made this confusing statement about the Temple, he understood and experienced that, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, the church had failed him again. After all, the first time Jesus got up to read Scripture, the church ran him out of town. After all, every time Jesus preached in the Temple, someone made a snide remark about him. After all, every time, Jesus tried to do something nice for someone, like heal them, the church called him into question. Maybe in this last act of public ministry, Jesus

wanted to pull back the curtain on the Holy of Holies so that everyone could also discover that the great and powerful Temple was not what it appeared to be. Instead, the Temple was simply a building being run by imperfect, broken, and very flawed people, people who were constantly saying, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.”

Maybe in this moment, Jesus wanted to remind his disciples and the people standing around that the things we have put our trust in are not eternal and at one point or another, we will be disappointed.

Think about our journeys of faith. Disappointment in the church happens. We all know what that moment is like, when our image, when our perception of the Church is torn down brick by brick. It happens each and every day. When we hear about church fighting, cracks begin to start. When we hear comments like, “I didn’t realize that church people could be so mean. What happen to loving your neighbor?”, the crumbling begins. When we hear stories about how a church run soup kitchen tells a certain group of people that they aren’t good enough to volunteer simply because the group was full of atheists, the curtain gets pulled back a little more and we discover the smoke and mirrors behind the operation. We discover the broken and imperfect the system failing the people it was partly created to help.

In that moment, we realize, just like Jesus, the church has failed us. We know that, At one point in time, all of our perceptions, all of our images of the Church have been torn down brick by brick. And then we were left with nothing but chaos and confusion. We didn't know who we could actually trust. We didn't know what we believed anymore.

We all know what that moment is like. It hurts. With just a few words, just a few actions, our sure foundations are shaken and yes maybe even shattered. This image of a strong, indestructible structure, this perception of a very loving community falls apart and we realize that the church has failed us once again.

I can remember when it happened for me the first time. I was a young girl, probably no more than 9 or 10, and my home church was having a congregational meeting about something. All I can remember about the meeting is that the minister stormed out, furious about something. I don't remember what the church was talking about and I don't remember how the problem was solved. I just remember sitting there thinking something about this whole picture wasn't right. I can just remember sitting there thinking, "Who are these people? What happened to the nice people I knew and loved? In that moment, my image of the great and powerful church fell down brick by brick.

Other friends have told me about their moment as well. One friend in particular shared his image and perception of how church fell apart and failed him

as well. It was during the 60's and he knew it was a time of confusion and chaos for everyone. But he can remember thinking, "Where is the church?" Civil Rights, Vietnam War, and the church was silent. As a young man, his image shifted from the great and powerful church to an institution, sitting on the sidelines, just waiting to see which side to join after the fight was over. In that moment, his image, his perception of a trusting, loving community, his church was destroyed brick by brick. He realized that the church failed him.

These stories are nothing new. The landscape of faith journeys are filled with broken bricks, busted stained glass, empty pews, and hurting hearts. All because at some point in time, we realized that the church failed us and all that was left was chaos and confusion. Perceptions destroyed. Images shattered. Pedestals knocked over. That moment hurts and it does truly devastates us as people who trusted, people who hoped, people who believed.

Sounds pretty hopeless right? But think about it. Sure that may have been what happened to us but we came back. We are in the church today. We are sitting in a church, among a community of flawed humans once again, regardless of the many cracks and crumbles that fill our perception and image of church. We may not be in that particular church again or maybe we are. It just took us a while to come back. Today, all we know is that for some reason or another, we are sitting in the church again, connected once again to a very broken human institution.

So what brought us back? Why are we here today, worshipping together, breaking bread with one another, doing mission work together? Why are we part of the church once more?

I think we need to look at our text once again for the answer to that question. Jesus tells his disciples to stick with it, to stay with it. Now, Jesus isn't saying this because he believes we are all naïve or too stupid to think that the church community won't disappoint us again.

No, Jesus tells his disciples back then and now to stick with it, to stay with it because Jesus knows that's the only way healing and wholeness can truly begin. If we walk away, hurt and broken, we will always stay hurt and broken. The blessing that Jesus gives us in our shattered perceptions and images of church is a true opening of our eyes. Because then and only then, can we really see how God works in the world. Because then and only then can we really start acting like the Body of Christ, being the Body of Christ for the people of God.

Let me explain: If we keep looking at the church through rose colored glasses, if we keep putting people on pedestals, they become untouchable. We can no longer relate to them. We can no longer understand them. We will never be able to see or accept our church or each other if we are only looking for perfection. In reality, each community of faith is made up of flawed people trying and yes sometimes failing, but trying to be the community that God calls us to be.

It's only when we realize that the church is just a church, just a building filled with very human, very flawed people, that we can truly get down to the business of the Kingdom of God, which is being in real, authentic relationships with one another. That can't happen when we have this unrealistic perception and image about the people of God.

In that moment when our perception of the perfect church, the perfect community of God is shattered, we are given the freeing understanding that the church and the Kingdom of God are not one and the same. Sure people should be able to find the Kingdom of God within the church walls, but never ever should we make the mistake that the Church is the Kingdom of God. They are not. But hopefully it was in the church and it is still in the church, where receive glimpses of the Kingdom of God. We wouldn't be here if that wasn't the case. We all have other things that we could be doing right now but we keep staying with it. We keep coming back to the Church.

To be honest, I think we keep coming back to the church in spite of who we are, broken and imperfect. I think we keep coming back just to remind ourselves, and prove to the world, that the church is not the Kingdom of God and that there is something more. I think we keep coming back to church, simply because we know, if we stick with it, healing and wholeness can happen because that's what God promised us from the very beginning. I think we keep coming back because we

have experienced and seen the Kingdom of God within these walls, outside of the walls, around this table, around other tables, through baptisms, funerals, through strong examples of faith, and through each other.

It should come as no surprise that we have been or will continue to be disappointed by the church. Jesus told us we would be. He also told us that we would be disappointed by our families, disappointed by our friends, and yes even disappointed by the people we put up on the pedestal all because we got it confused somewhere. And that place, that moment when the confusion began to happen was when we began looking for something eternal in our very temporary human institutions. Jesus said that in this life we only get glimpses and we have tried to make those glimpses permanent by connecting with our human churches.

When our perceptions and images of our church are broken, it is a wonderful reminder of what will truly last, what will last beyond our buildings, beyond our structures, beyond our hurt, beyond even death. We are reminded that what is eternal is love, grace and hope. And the greatest of these is love.

So to be honest, I think we keep coming back to church, to our flawed broken community just to prove and remind ourselves that there is something more, that we are called to that something more. I think we like knowing that in spite of ourselves, God is bigger. I think we like knowing that in spite of our imperfections, God still uses us to bring about the Kingdom of God. I think we like

knowing that in spite of the confusion and chaos that can happen when church people get involved, our story is bigger than all that. We know that the world didn't have the last word on the cross. And in spite of it all, we keep coming back to church because we have the promise that God is still working to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth.

And, let's face it, where else would we want to be? In spite of the brokenness in the church, we know that there is no place we would rather be. We want to be with people who know the good, the bad, the ugly about us just as much as we know all that stuff about them and in spite of it all, we know we are called to be in community with them. Because that is what Jesus calls us to do, that is what Jesus showed us to do. Jesus was never alone and if by chance he was, he was never alone for long. Jesus was constantly surrounded by broken people, people who failed him time and time again. But he never left them alone. He never gave up on them. Jesus stayed with them and helped them become the people God called them and created them to be. And that still holds true for us today. We hold to the belief that we are called to be in real, authentic relationship with one another, loving one another, caring for one another, just like God first loved us.

So I think the real reason we keep coming back to the church is because in the midst of it all, in spite of ourselves, we still hold to the vision that God has the last word. We still hold the vision that God has called us to be partners with God in

creation. We still hold that each one is claimed and named as God's very own. And we want to be around people who hold to the same thing. We want to be around people who live out this vision, this Kingdom in their own lives through their words and their actions. We want to be around people who get that in spite of it all, God is still at work.

Our journeys of faith are more than just broken bricks and crushed stained glass. We have experienced the healing around breaking bread with one another. We have experienced the wholeness that can happen in forgiveness. And we have experience the Kingdom of God in our midst as soon we started to recognize that it and the church were not one and the same.

May we keep staying with it until all of God's creation realizes the same thing. Amen.