

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scriptures: John 2:13-22 and Luke 21:5-6

Today we begin a six-week focus on being invitational. Each Sunday we will ask the question “Want to come to church?” and pair it with a question that we might hear in response: like “What’s church?” or “Why church?” or even “Uou go to church?” Pastor Tim and I believe that this series is probably the most important series we have yet to do in this church. We will challenge and push you in the next six weeks to really embrace the identity of an invitational church. Because if we cannot become a church that invites, we become a church that can only be stagnant and has no hope of growth. If we cannot become a church that invites, we accept the reality that in fifteen to twenty years this church will either dwindle in size to a small family church or cease to exist all together. That’s the seriousness for which we hope you will engage this series, because Pastor Tim and I know in our hearts that this particular part of Christ’s body that lives in the heart of the city of Hagerstown is worth having around for generations to come. So, let’s do this, okay?

Both of our scriptures this morning are related to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. In the text from the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the imagery of the destruction of the temple to foreshadow his own death. But the text from Luke is very explicitly about the future destruction of the temple. While Jesus was teaching in the temple, someone commented on the greatness of the temple with its beautiful stones and ornate gifts dedicated to God. To this comment, Jesus predicts that there will come a day when the temple will lie in ruins.

This must have been horrifying for the Jews to hear. For them, the temple was not just a building, it was the place where God lived, the place where they could encounter their God. It was a symbol of their faith and represented everything it meant to be a Jew. To have it destroyed would threaten not only their way of life, but the very foundation of their faith.

Which is exactly what Jesus had come to do. Jesus was not just predicting the future destruction of the temple, but was commenting on his purpose. Through the destruction of the temple of his body in death, and through his resurrection, it would no longer matter if there was a temple in Jerusalem. Jesus would challenge any inclination that put too much store in the significance of a building and a place.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had just finished criticizing the scribes for walking around in long ornate robes and reveling in their honored position while at the same time being leaders who “devour widow’s houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” The temple in all its glory was no more a guarantee of faithfulness than the scribes with their skewed priorities. The temple was, as Keith Nickle says it, “an artifact of the age [that] would not endure.” What would endure and what Christ came to inaugurate is God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. God’s reign needed no temple. In fact, God’s reign needed there to be no temple where it is too easy to get caught up in nostalgia rather than in God’s will -- tradition rather than the Spirit’s movement.

Can you sense where I am going with this yet?

There has been a cloud over mainstream churches in America for at least the past ten years, longer in some places. We have seen attendance in most churches dwindle. Churches have had to close their doors and either remain vacant or be filled with stores that sell antiques. The church has lost most of its power and influence in the social sphere. We can no longer make assumptions that our neighbor attends church on Sunday mornings. Our children go to school with people of many faiths and cultures. Most Sundays we can find plenty of other ways to

spend our time instead of attending worship. And with all of this, we feel that the church as we know it is being deconstructed, stone by stone. We wonder, what will be left? We may try with all our might to brace the walls as they come crumbling down, but to no avail. This is the reality of the age we are in. Welcome to what philosophers and theologians call “the postmodern turn.”

It is easy for us to spend our time bracing the walls of this crumbling temple and to be afraid of the changes because we don't know where they will lead. But the problem with our fear and with digging in our heels is that these are a product of our lack of faith and trust. It is easy for those of us living now to read about the Jews in scripture and judge them for their thick heads. I mean, they were in the presence of the son of God and still dug in their heels and many refused to change! But we are not so different. We have Jesus Christ just as much today, and he is calling us not to be bound by these walls, not to spend our time building buttresses to hold up something that is crumbling, but to strengthen our faith in him and follow boldly. Christ calls us not to be bound by our traditions but to be moved by the Holy Spirit. If we respond to the changes that happen all around us with fear and increased determination to hold on to what is left, we are saying there is no way that God is still working in the here and now. We tell God, sorry, you have lost your power to build your kingdom here because I have lost my power. But remember, for the first 300 years of the church, they had no power but the power of God. Let me ask you a hard question: what if God is the one tearing down the temple so that we can once again turn to him and his will for us?

There is no room for fear and digging in our heels as the world changes around us. Not if we want to remain faithful to God and continue to seek God's will. If we respond with fear desperately holding on to things that don't matter, Christ may come to us and say “as for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” And guess what, this is good news. Christ doesn't care about our music preferences, but that we raise our voices in praise. Christ doesn't care about what color we choose to paint the walls, but that we are good stewards of what we have been given. Christ doesn't care if we worship, do Sunday School, or fellowship the way we've always done it, but He cares that we are striving to learn about him and his will for our lives as individuals and as the body of Christ. For us to truly be an invitational church in a changing world, we cannot build our foundation on the shifting sand of tradition, but on the rock that is Christ. Christ never changes, even when it seems everything else around us does.

I know this is hard to hear. When I became an adult and noticed the family traditions of my childhood changing, I really struggled. The nostalgia I feel is strong when I remember summer vacations at Canaan Valley, West Virginia, or Christmas at my grandparents' house with all of my cousins. These were beautiful and wonderful times, but they are no longer possible. My Grandpa has been gone now for 13 years. All of my cousins are grown and are starting families of their own. These things have required us to change our traditions, to adapt to our new reality. Our nostalgia that we hold for our childhood church or the church that shaped us and brought us into faith is a beautiful thing, but it was never meant to stay the way we remember. It can't.

For this reason, from this day forward I would like to make a few phrases off limits from our conversations as a church. These phrases we have all used at some point or another, so don't for a minute think... yeah, so and so who sits over there said that once, and I hope they are feeling convicted in their seats. No, think no one but yourself. Not only are these phrases detrimental to our own community, but they create an attitude that is the opposite of invitational. So, repeat after me, because these are the last times I want to hear them said:

1. "We don't have any children!" Or the slightly less abrasive version - "I remember when the Sunday School building was full!" No more! Not only does this say that we are living in the past, but it is a complete and utter lie! We have children, and if you don't know that then you are not paying attention. Volunteer to teach Sunday School, show up to Youth Club, see them as they provide leadership in worship, talk to our children and our youth before and after worship. We will not grow a children's or youth program with this attitude, nor will we make the young people that are already here feel valued and appreciate.
2. "I won't do it because we've never done it this way." Or a variation on the same theme - "it's always been this way." Brothers and sisters, do you still use a telegraph machine, or even a phone with the dial? Ladies, are you still walking around in your poodle skirts? Men, are you feeling like pulling your parachute pants? No, not so much? So why do we expect that the church won't change or adapt to changing times. If we cannot name another reason for why it should be this way or that way other than because it's what we are used to, then we are missing the point. And if we cannot explain the importance of something with faith language, then we need to ask ourselves why it is so important to us.
3. And finally, "so and so did this, can you believe it." Or, "did you hear what so and so said?" Paul Munday has on multiple occasions declared the Hagerstown Church of the Brethren a no gossip zone and I applaud him every time. This is hard because it is easier to bad mouth someone behind their back than to approach them directly in the midst of a conflict. We are imperfect people who are charged with sharing a perfect gospel, so of course that means our humanity gets the best of us at times. But invitational churches seek to deal with conflict well and give each other the benefit of the doubt. People will not want to be a part of a community that appears to hate one another. Nowhere in our baptismal vows did it say we are to be perfect, but we are expected to show that we care for one another and value each other enough to do conflict well.

These phrases are the symptom of a foundational, attitude problem. To be truly invitational in a changing world means banishing these phrases from our vocabulary, and I hope we can hold one another accountable to this change of attitude. Because, which sounds more inviting, "Our youth gave a really great presentation on their experience at workcamps this past Sunday" or "The youth were leading in worship this last week and it reminded me of a time when we had a lot more in worship." Which is more invitational: "We started a new women's retreat at the Hagerstown Church of the Brethren and it has been really great" or "Our leadership keeps changing things and I don't like it." Which will make people want to be a part of our community: "Our church is full of people who are not perfect, but we love one another" or "my parents and so and so's parents couldn't get along in the church so now we fight too."

Brothers and sisters, learning to be an invitational church is going to be hard work. To be invitational, we have to know what we are inviting people to be a part of. It requires us to know what is most important to be and do as Christ's body. It requires us to put ourselves in the hands of God, who holds our future just as much as he held our past. Next week, Pastor Tim is going to work at shifting our assumptions about the purpose and goal of the church. In the meantime, reflect on this question: Is the church the kingdom of God, or does the Kingdom of God have a church?

Put your faith in our God who is ever present, who reigns and nothing, no nothing, can change that. But brothers and sisters, let's be a part of this gospel work. Let's join God in building his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This is what it means to be the church. Amen? Amen.