



USHER'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, July 13, 2008

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Lection – Matthew 21:12-14 and Hebrews 13:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

Matthew 21:12-14

(v. 12) Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. (v. 13) He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer;" but you are making it a den of robbers.' (v. 14) The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.

Hebrews 13:1-2

(v. 1) Let mutual love continue. (v. 2) Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Many have said, with and without direct reference to ushering, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than dwell in the tents of the wicked,” and have used Psalm 84 to signify the historic presence of ushers in ancient biblical history. Metaphors associated with ushering are doorkeeper, porter, gatekeeper, or officer of temple worship. Since ushers stand at the door (and various strategic places in and outside the sanctuary), they are often the first contact society has with the organized services of the church. Ushers play a critical, albeit underrated function in the church. Ushers operate in hospitality, they facilitate in order, but most of all they celebrate in Christ!

The work of ushers is best encapsulated by two words, hospitality and order. Therefore, celebrating Usher’s Day is celebrating those acts of hospitality: such as the divine welcome ushers extend to those entering a house of worship and the order that results from an usher’s attention to details. Hospitality and order as part of the worship hour maintains a sense of spiritual openness and liberality without confusion. Usher’s Day draws attention to the ways in which stewards of the church are born to extend God’s grace toward the world. Celebrating Usher’s Day is rejoicing in the ministry of helps, and honoring those gifted in that ministry.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 21:12-14 and Hebrews 13:1-2

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As a doctoral candidate in ethics and society, I am conscious of the ways the historical black church impacts various communities. I believe that most pressing in our contemporary context is making Christianity relevant to a swelling number of people who do not attend church. One way the church becomes relevant to a context larger than itself, is by painting a clear ecclesiological picture of who it is. **If the church claims as its ethos a “welcoming and healing” environment based upon Jesus Christ as a central and mediating figure, then the resulting atmosphere should reflect his message, “Let them come.”** One way to assure that this ethos is communicated is to architect the building and orchestrate the members to this end.

The Matthew 21:12-14 text challenges believers to gather with a singleness of purpose, to be a community of prayer. Thus, we should celebrate ushers as those who are theologically driven to focus the community in worship and prayer. They provide the requisite joy at the door and are ambassadors of order inside the doors.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Exegetes of Matthew 21:12-14 have traditionally delineated it as the “Cleansing of the Temple.” However, the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary on Matthew suggests that this signification is not an altogether accurate portrayal of the text. In the Court of the Gentiles, where our scene unfolds, animals were sold for sacrifice and money was exchanged “into the Tyrian coinage acceptable for gifts to the Temple.” Both of these practices were necessary, even though they were subject to abuse.

Verses 12 and 14 suggest that Jesus does two things. When he enters the temple area, the Court of Gentiles, he drives out all who are buying and selling and turns over the tables of the money changers and those selling doves. Then he invites in the marginalized. In other words he casts out the “insiders,” and welcomes the “outsiders,” the blind and the lame and heals them. The piece that holds this action together is v. 13 which says, “He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a den of robbers.’” The unlikely people who understand Jesus’ actions are the children crying out in the temple in v.15, “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

The text seems to operate as a divine reversal. Not only will the first be last, but the insiders will be the outsiders and the outsiders will be welcome inside, and “out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies” praise will sound its best.

I imagine that Jesus faced a dilemma upon finding those with whom he identified excluded from the place of worship. The question for Jesus may have been, “do I continue watching how much abuse flows from the temple courts or do I respond, bringing more negative attention to myself?” Jesus may have thought it easier to ignore what he saw. Jesus may have resolved that he should leave it alone and wait for God’s judgment, instead he acted. Jesus did what every usher should do for the church, *make room for the outsider*. This is an act of justice. Every community has persons toward which justice needs to be extended. Marvin McMickle, in his book Where Have All the Prophets Gone,² suggests that the church must have concern for those “in the community who are the neediest, the most vulnerable, and the most at risk of having no advocate.” McMickle issues a moral call to the church to act upon the “justice agenda of Jesus.” I believe that agenda is one that every ministry of the church should adopt, including ushers. When the church’s ushers adopt the “justice agenda of Jesus” other problems (e.g. fashion malfunctions, special seating requests, out of control children, etc.) will pale in comparison.

Making room for the outsider may upset the balance of the church, but opening the doors of the church ought not be a threatening situation. Ushers will play a significant role introducing to longtime members those persons who are new to the congregation. The black church has always made room for one more. Riggins Earl Jr. suggests in his essay, “Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The Ethics of Social and Spiritual Hospitality in Black Church Worship,”³ that “[the black church’s] worshippers, because they have dared practice it, have always been willing to make room ‘under their own vine and fig tree’ for those different from themselves. In doing so, they have maintained the viral, creative tension between spiritual and social hospitality. The former without the latter, makes church worship a ritualistic exercise in spiritual escapism; the latter without the former, makes a ritualistic exercise in camaraderie. Whenever either is sacrificed for the other, the church becomes an impotent witness for Christ.”

Making room for the outsider reaffirms the humanity of all persons. While there are distinct differences among African American worshippers, the condition which unifies us is our humanity. Our humanity is not based upon scientific classification, that is, the

ability to walk upright on two legs; it is not even based on our intelligence quotient, or capacity for knowledge. What it means to be human, theologically, is shaped by our understanding of the importance of the notion of an accepted self in a community of selves. As ushers make room for the outsider, they are affirming the vital common denominator we share, having been created in the image of God. Each of us springs forth from the imagination of God regardless of our station in life.

And lastly, Hebrew 13:2 reminds us, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” We never know to whom we are talking, whom we are welcoming or tuning away, to whom we are offering a much needed embrace or a cold shoulder. God still sends angels by from time to time. Some for brief visits and some linger for a longer amount of time.

Celebration

While Matthew 21:12-14 offers a distinct challenge for the church to remember its conception as a ‘house of prayer,’ (v. 15) is an unmitigated celebration of the one known as Hosanna, Son of David. The children happen to be the only ones that can perceive this truth. Perhaps in a sense they are the real ushers in the text. They usher in a celebration of the Christ.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: Tables crashing to the floor, coins rolling across the marble halls, wooden benches breaking (v.12), Jesus calling to those in the temple (v.13), the footsteps and canes of the blind and lame (14), and the children shouting in the temple (v. 15);

Sights: Crowds of people, business merchants buying and selling, animals and birds, the differently-abled, priests and teachers of the law, children, and Jesus; and

Smells: Sacrificed wild animals and fragrant incense.

Notes

1. See biblical references: Mark 13:34; John 10:3; John 18:16, 17 and Serving As A Church Usher. (Formerly titled The Usher’s Manual.) Ed. Paul E. Engle. Detroit, MI: Zondervan Press, 2002.
2. McMickle, Marvin Andrew. Where Have All the Prophets Gone?: Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006. p. 42.
3. Costen, Melva Wilson, and Darius L. Swann. The Black Christian Worship Experience. Black Church Scholars Series, v. 4. Atlanta, GA: Interdenominational Theological Center, 1992. pp. 192-3.