

HEARTBEATS- Staying Connected 10/29/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus' day reveals a great deal about the culture in which He lived. It also helps us to understand why Jesus spent time with the people He did, and why the religious leaders opposed Him so zealously. The Temple structure told everyone a great deal about who was "worthy" of God and who was not.

At the center of the Temple was the Holy of Holies. If you think about the design of St. Andrew Lutheran, this area would be the chancel or altar area, except instead of a communion railing, there was a curtain that completely surrounded the altar. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and only on one day a year. Then there was the court of the priest and the Levites. This would be the nave or the main worship area at St. Andrew where the pews are, except there weren't any pews in the Temple. Only the priest could enter this area, and the Levites who were responsible for cleaning and maintaining the Temple. Next was the court of the Jewish men. At St. Andrew, this would be the entry or narthex, though it would be much bigger to accommodate all the circumcised Jewish men. The last area of the Temple was the court of the Jewish women and foreigners. This would be the patio area outside the building at St. Andrew, though in the Temple it was enclosed. This area was for the Jewish women and the converts to Judaism who were not Jewish by race. Except during their years of menstruation, the women could rarely get in because of the Jewish beliefs about blood and ritual cleanliness. Outside the Temple entrance, there was a sign that warned any non-Jew from entering the Temple under penalty of death. So, you knew who was in and who was out, and among those who were in, who was only partially in. It seems like everybody needs some kind of sinner or pagan or heretic against whom to compare themselves.

But even within these guidelines, there were many more who couldn't get in. Father Richard Rohr in Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality, list seven groups who had to remain outside the Temple. First, there were those with skin conditions, usually labeled "lepers." They were declared permanently unclean and could never come in. Second were those with any kind of visible disability, who obviously had fallen out of favor with God or they would have these physical limitations. Third were the Gentiles or non-Jews who were not believers in the Jewish faith. This was the largest group prohibited from entering the Temple. The fourth group I've already mentioned: women before and after their menstrual periods. Following menstruation, there would be a time of waiting and then a special sacrifice had to be made to the priests before you could go into the first courtyard—which became very expensive for women each month. Fifth were Jewish men after seminal discharge if it was not for the purpose of reproduction. (Sorry, guys.) Sixth were those people who worked in professions that made them permanently unclean or unworthy, like butchers or leatherworkers who came in contact with animal blood, or tax collectors who interact with Gentiles, or those who handled the dead, or those who worked with unclean animals like pigs. Finally, the seventh group were the illegitimate children of priests. All these people were unworthy of coming into God's presence in the Temple.

But look with whom Jesus spent His time. Matthew was a tax collector who associated with unclean Gentiles. Jesus healed many lepers and invalids, and often did so by touching them. He touched the bodies of the dead and raised them back to life (are you clean again if you return to life, or once dead are you always unclean?). He talked with women. He talked with foreigners. He dealt with those who were possessed by evil spirits. It's no wonder the religious leaders didn't want Him around. There are always people on the inside and people at the top who want to make sure that only certain people—the people they like—can get in. That's not how Jesus operated, though. He wanted everyone, and especially those who were on the outside to know that God's love extends to everyone, no matter who you are, or what you've done or haven't done, or whatever conditions others may try to put on you. God's love is for everyone, unconditionally.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey