

*A Cure for Organized Religion*

Mark 11:1-11

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

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My friend, Nick Overduin, who used to be pastor of First Christian Reformed Church on Taunton Rd., just off Eglinton at Mount Pleasant, told me a story this week that made me laugh. It seems that there was a five-year-old boy once who missed the annual Palm Sunday service because he had a tummy ache. His dad came back from church service holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked, “Why do you have that palm branch?”

“Well,” said his dad, “You see, when Jesus came into town riding on a donkey, everyone waved Palm Branches to honour him, so today in church we got some Palm Branches to celebrate Jesus coming into town.”

The little boy replied, “Aw Shucks. The one Sunday I miss church is the Sunday Jesus actually shows up!”

And that’s how it is with church, sometimes, isn’t it? For kids—and if truth be told—many adults who attend church; and perhaps especially for the millions of Torontonians who hardly ever darken the door of church; church seems a dull, boring exercise in irrelevant religion. Nothing ever happens in church.

Well, except at Lawrence Park Community Church, where good things do happen. Compared to many of the churches I’ve visited over the past twenty years—I’ve preached at more than 300 different churches—Lawrence Park Community Church is a happening place. Between Wizard of Oz or Night of the Dead themed worship services, Rockin’ Dawgs and Jazz, Children’s Pageants and Art Shows and Youth Programs and Sunday School and retreats and volunteerism, a lot actually happens at LPCC. So much so, in fact, that it sometimes leaves the staff gasping for air. It’s a good, interesting, busy place around here.

But, as my friend Nick pointed out, we live in a culture that doesn’t have that perspective on church, and in a city where people sort of automatically grow up just assuming that organized religion is irrelevant.

And then, if you actually think about it, Jesus wasn’t such a big fan of church either—or of synagogue, or temple, or whatever they called it in that day. We learn from the New Testament that Jesus only went to the temple in Jerusalem a few times. He did his teaching on the mountainside, he fed the crowds by the lake, he told parables outside of people’s homes, but he didn’t go to church much. And in our passage we read that on Palm Sunday Jesus went to the temple and merely looked around, and then left.

The next day Jesus went to the temple again and did what no one else did in church—he threw out all the business functionaries there: the sacrifice traders, the money changers, the food vendors, the business people who made a living off of pilgrims. Jesus wasn't into organized religion.

Jesus did unorganized religion. For example, on Palm Sunday, two thousand years ago, the atmosphere on the street that led from the city gate to the temple was electric. Jesus came into town riding on a donkey, obviously making the point that the religious leaders and Romans ought to get off their high horses and out of the war chariots and rule with justice and compassion instead. Jesus was being outrageous and daring and cheeky. The crowds went nuts. People tore their coats off and laid them at the feet of the donkey. Children danced, waving palm branches and singing Hosannas. The adults shouted praise and laughed to see just how silly Jesus was making the Romans and the Pharisees look. It was William Nylander getting called up to the Leafs, José Bautista doing a bat flip. Jesus' walk up the street was political religion, religious drama, and dramatic spirituality all rolled into one—and none of it was in church.

By comparison, most churches, and sometimes even LPCC, are pretty staid, pretty predictable, don't you think?

I read a book recently—a trilogy, actually—that reminded me of what church can be, at its worst. The youth of the church, in particular, might also have read these books. It's the Silo series, by Hugh Howey. The three books are titled: *Wool*, *Shift*, and *Dust*.

In these books, after a huge nuclear war, several thousand humans are eking out a living in a huge underground silo, 150 stories tall—or deep, actually. The silos were built to survive the war. They were built to last hundreds of years, until such time as the world was safe again.

The silo is a complete self-contained community, with enough perishable supplies for hundreds of years. The silo has oil wells beneath, and power generators at its lowest levels, stores and computers in the middle levels, and housing and government offices at the top levels, all connected by staircases. The silo has a sheriff and a mayor who oversee food production, monitor morale, and how many babies are born.

But what is really interesting about the silo is that over hundreds of years it has killed people's desire to find freedom beyond its walls. They have forgotten what cows are, what birds flying look like, what life on the streets could be.

In the novel, it is only when a few intrepid, adventurous, daring rule breakers actually finally risk leaving the silo behind, that real life begins again. The silo novels are a critique of how organizations—the state, churches, corporations—often begin living for themselves, turning inward, rather than living for the good of their people and neighbours, and the good of the earth.

Unfortunately, many people experience church like that silo. Church is rules, regulations, fights about doctrines and tradition. Hierarchy. Routines. Myths about what happened in the past. And it's all safe, and predictable, and organized. Nobody comes to church, sits down in a pew, straps on a seat belt harness and puts on a crash helmet. This is organized religion after all. But Jesus wasn't a fan.

So now what?

Well, two things. First, this isn't an either/or situation, religion in the church or religion in the streets. Jesus actually did both. The Apostles Paul and Peter did both. St. Francis of Assisi, Jean Vanier, Mother Theresa, and even Rob Oliphant do both—religion in the church and religion in the street.

But religion does need both wings to fly. So this is an invitation. If organized religion is going to mean something for you, it can't be restricted to a Sunday silo. That is, you and I cannot restrict our faith life to church. The spiritual things we hope for, the love we profess, the truths we treasure must free themselves from the silo and be allowed to shape not just this one hour on Sunday mornings; in fact, this spiritual stuff we hear about in this sanctuary has to be the very spice of the rest of our lives, 24/7, informing how we act at work, what companies we invest in, how we vote on election day, how we volunteer our time, how we do—or don't—offer a helping hand, how we raise our kids, how we spend our money. Organized religion restricted to the Sunday morning church silo may be personally comforting for a few, but it is exactly this sort of organized religion that is absolutely dead when it comes to the rest of life.

This is why so many of the projects we do in the church are vital—from sponsoring refugees to collecting used clothing, from having art shows to serving meals. These projects are not just important because they are good deeds. These projects are actually symbolic of how we want to take our religious values out of church and into the street with all our lives, all the time.

But second, if church isn't a silo, and if we want to take our religion into the streets, then how are we to think of the church? Well here's a thought.

Instead of thinking of the church as a silo, think of it as a heart. A heart pumps blood throughout your body. It does so in two stages. In the diastolic stage, blood from the body enters the heart, low in oxygen and important nutrients. It is exhausted blood, in a way, and your blood pressure, if you're healthy, falls to about 80 psi. But then, in the systolic stage, the valves between the heart and the rest of the body open, and the heart beats, and your blood pressure rises to 120 psi, and all that tired blood gets pushed into your lungs, where it is fed, aerated, and propelled back through the rest of your body.

Church is like that. Church ought to be our systolic moment, where we are pushed back into the world, spiritually rejuvenated. In fact, we need the rhythm—a life so full and engaged with doing what we want to do the way we want to do it that the spiritual energy for it wanes,

and we tire. So then we go to church, are rejuvenated, renewed, refocussed, refriended, rejoiced over and we charge out of the doors, ready to do our spiritual best again, for another week, with an eager smile on our faces and a helping hand ready to go to work.

The little boy was not impressed by the church because he couldn't find Jesus there—the highly political, in your face, donkey-kong laughing Jesus of life.

And of course, it is two thousand years later, and so Jesus isn't going to march in through those doors at the back of the sanctuary. There isn't much we can do about that. But what I'd like that little boy to experience as he grows up is that the Jesus he learns about in church is the Christ he can be for others outside those doors.