

The Tearoom Door
(Mark 13:1-8)

11/21/21
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Thanksgiving is around the corner. The chill at night signals winter's edge and next Saturday we will signal the change of seasons by decorating the sanctuary with the trappings of Advent and Christmas. I hope you will come and join us. (I think we will pipe in a little Christmas music to go along with the fellowship).

It is a season when many will gather to joyfully strengthen the bonds of love and good will among friends and family. It is a time to open our hearts in gratitude and in faith and humble expectation. We are also conscious that we are entering a season dreaded by some, when the happy laughter and fellowship of others will amplify the absence of loved ones. And for others still, there will be trepidation as they wonder whether this may be the moment when broken relationships can be healed.

So what, we may ask, is the point of having a Gospel reading like this morning's reading at this time of year? Why, at a time when building up the Body of Christ in family, church and community should be the focus, are we hearing about the inevitable collapse of the temple in Jerusalem?

It seems like a rather weak and dismal image to consider, at a time when a strong and positive attitude appear to be called for to undergird the good cheer, cider and donuts of the season.

In fact many of the assigned readings that we draw on as we enter Advent and approach Christmas are all about things collapsing around us, and on an apocalyptic scale! And Jesus's observation that the temple will become a pile of rubble, is just a heads up. It is as though Jesus is intent on kicking the chair out from under his disciples and from under us.

I do think that there is a good reason for what Jesus is doing. And it is this. For us as individuals, for families and for communities to be able to come together and experience renewed vigor and commitment, there very often has to be some kind of collapse or breakdown; something "monumental" has to go.

And the collapse very often has to involve something that is highly cherished. It will be something that has been relied on as though it were a permanent anchor, just as the Jerusalem temple would have seemed to the disciples to be the most permanent visible anchor for a life of faith.

And so an important part of the message which underlies this season of get togethers, is this ominous biblical message. It is ominous in the sense that we fear the collapse of those things we have put faith in; let's call them our "idolatry." But it is also a hopeful message, because Jesus draws our attention to "birthpangs" that will arise from out of the midst of this collapse. In other words, something new will be born in the midst of it all, a birth not without pain; but which will end in the triumph of our loving God.

The Low Bar in the Door

How can we picture what this means for you and me in the here and now in this season set aside for getting together? Well, I would like to share with you a story that may shed some light.

But first, a little cultural fact. If you ever get a chance to look at a traditional Japanese tea room, you will notice that, in many cases the entrance is rather small, sometimes an opening about two feet high. I once saw a tea room with a normal sized door, but extended across it at about waist height was a wooden beam, so that even though it was a perfectly good door, you would still have to bend over and get on your hands and knees to enter.

It doesn't make any practical sense. Even the server has to get down and slide the tea tray through on the floor to get in. And in the old days, Samurai had to take off their swords, so that they would not get stuck in the doorway as they crawled through.

Obviously, there is some reason for creating this inconvenience. And the reason is essential to the ceremony itself. In order to participate in the tea ceremony in an appropriate frame of mind, a person has to leave his or her ego at the door. And one way to ensure that people do this, is by creating an entrance that forces all who enter to break out of their upright posture and go through the humbling experience of crawling through the door.

By doing so, they are voluntarily stripping themselves of their social ranking, their self-pride and anything that separates them from the rest of humanity. The bar in the door is a powerful "equalizer" that must be experienced as mental preparation for the tea ceremony. It prepares the participants to be together in a very basic and appreciative way.

The Proud Samurai

Here's the story. Once there was a Proud Samurai. He saw himself as a man of great dignity, an awesome warrior worthy of the greatest

respect. And as warriors will, he took some time each day cleaning the and sharpening his beautiful swords, the symbols of his status.

It was a precarious time for Samurai in general. The appearance of strange ships from the west signalled that their reality was changing in ways no one could fully understand. There was much jockeying for power among the feudal lords and a decent Samurai like himself could very easily find himself destitute and without a master.

Our particular Samurai was very aware of the precariousness of his situation. And because he could not bear facing the shame of ever losing his status, he fiercely protected it. Whenever he was out and about, he made sure that the common people who crossed his path, bowed before him. And if he felt slighted, he would quickly put his hand on the hilt of his sword and demand that they get on their knees and apologize. He was very serious about this. Other Samurai had not hesitated to execute people who were not sufficiently respectful and he himself was perfectly ready to do so.

One day as he was walking, he passed by a woman who failed to bow before him. And later that day, it struck him as odd, that he had not even thought to command her obedience... On reflection it seemed to

him that there was something about the calmness of her demeanor that must have caused him to be momentarily forgetful.

A week later he saw her again, but rather than demand obedience he followed her, so curious was he to learn the reason for her calm composure. She came to the door of a tearoom, with a wooden beam stretched across it at waist height. And there he confronted her and asked her outright, how she was able to be so composed. And as he questioned her, he could hear the terrible anxiety in his own voice. And in that moment he knew that there was something essential that was missing inside himself that was present inside of her.

The woman told him that each day she performed the tea ceremony and that he was welcome to join them. The Samurai was overjoyed at the invitation and seeing the bar across the door, he asked her where the other entrance for Samurai might be. She told him that this was the only door and that all who took part in the tea ceremonies entered through this door.

The Samurai's smile disappeared as he realized what this would mean. He would have to get down on his hands and knees before others, like a servant, and crawl through the door. And this was an act of humility he was not willing to make.

The next day, the Samurai wandered around in such a state of agitation that he didn't even stop to make people bow before him. All he could think of was whether a man of such dignity and grandeur as himself; a man who bowed before no-one other than his feudal lord; a man whose sword commanded the awe and obedience of others, could be seen crawling on his hands and knees, under any circumstances. It was a preposterous idea. Certainly not!

Each day he went and secretly watched from behind a tree as one by one the guests entered the tearoom, people from all walks of life. He saw the anticipation on their faces as they approached the door and the look of peace on each face as they crawled back out and went on their way. Once he even saw a Samurai enter and gasped in disbelief as the Samurai took off his swords and put them on a sword rack before crawling into the tea room.

And then it happened. One day, as he was watching the people arrive, a twig snapped under his foot and the woman looked up and saw him before he could hide himself. She came smiling to him and invited him to enter. Something collapsed inside the Samurai. He searched frantically for it, the monument to Samurai greatness that had anchored his life and that he must now defend. Where was that voice

inside him that told him never to allow the appearance of weakness? It was gone. All that was left was dust and rubble.

Trembling and disarmed within, the Samurai watched himself walk slowly to the door of the teahouse. He took off his sword, got on his hands and knees and crawled through the hole. He sat for the hour in the small circle of guests not really sure where he was or how he felt. But it was dawning on him that something big and irreversible had happened to him and that he was experiencing the birthpangs of something new being born in his heart, something that had to do with the promise of peace in the eyes of tea master. And sensing this, he dared to give in to the first moment of pure joy he had experienced in a very long time.

The Samurai is You

On its surface, this morning's Gospel reading is about how Jesus predicting the collapse of the temple in Jerusalem. But as with many Bible stories it is also meant to be read on more than one level. And when we consider the echo of Jesus's references to the temple in other places, it is clear that he sees God's temple as being his body in which the heart of God resides. And by extension he sees us in a similar way.

And so the fall of the old temple is also an outward sign of an inner collapse that Jesus is foretelling. He is foretelling the collapse of the idolatries we hold, the altars before which we worship that prevent us from joining together in our common humanity to receive the gift of grace anew; very like the altar to “Samurai greatness”, before which our Samurai worshipped.

Crossbars in Every Door

We may ask why is it that we do not have something like the bar on the tea room door as part of the practice of our faith that can free us as our Samurai was freed. And I would say that we do. Our shared confession of sin, is for us the cross bar on the tearoom door. We say it as a way of admitting that, in whatever ways we may have elevated ourselves above others, we now publically confess to each other and before God, that we have no basis for elevating ourselves above others.

And if we do this on communion Sunday, we always do it before we share the bread and cup, so that there is no one to look down on or look up to as we scan the pews around us. Every one of us is in the same boat here; wholly dependent on the grace of God. The chair has been kicked out from under us, but it is replaced by the indwelling of the God who so deeply loves us. And therein lies our infinite value.

Holiday Season

I think it is worth imagining especially as we approach holiday season, which doorways would you put an imaginary beam across before entering?

Perhaps a low post in the door of family and relatives or friends we will be visiting. So that when we cross the threshold, we can mentally crawl through the entrance, freeing us of every pretense of superiority or self-righteousness, and enabling us to experience our common humanity and to wait on God.

And in those situations that have been fraught by tension, we may feel the frightening and yet hopeful pangs of the birth of something new, something that will find its fullest expression in the child to be born on Christmas Eve. It is God's power perfected in weakness. Thanks be to God.