

## **When Life Together is Hard: Institutions**

*A sermon preached on Mark 13:1-8 on Sunday, November 17, 2024,  
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

“Here’s the church, here’s the steeple, open the doors and see all the people. Close the doors and hear them pray. Open the doors, they all walk away.”

Show of hands, how many of you learned that little saying as a child? That’s what I figured. Let’s think together – what did it teach us about church? Church is a building with a steeple. Church has doors that open and close a lot. Church is a place to which people go and pray, and a place from which they go and walk away.

I’m not stacking all the blame of contemporary church challenges on a nursery rhyme, but it does strike me that sayings like this – while intended to be helpful and instructive – may have actually caused more confusion than clarity when it comes to what the church should be. As I said this morning in First Impressions, the church is not a place, however beautiful. The church is not a service, however meaningful. Rather, the church is the people of God gathered in dynamic community. The container of time and space is but the container. The good news is what’s inside.

### II.

To use a familiar metaphor to us these days, this tendency to confuse the treasure in the jar with the jar itself is as old as the hills. Not even the original disciples of Jesus are immune to its pull. Think about how they might have engaged with their religious tradition’s most important space – the Temple. They were a ragtag bunch of rural fishermen, a tax collector, some

politically-charged revolutionaries, and a zealot. I can only imagine how taken they were with Herod's temple – and for good measure! It was a building 150 feet wide and 150 feet tall, built with white stone, covered in silver and gold, shining in the sun so much that, according to Josephus the Roman-Jewish historian who wrote prolifically about this era, the sight almost blinded spectators when the sun shone on it.<sup>1</sup> The disciples were like tourists with their first glimpse at Times Square, marveling at its scope – but with extra layers of meaning, because the Temple wasn't just a beautiful building, it was where God was! “How could one believe in a world apart from this household of God?,” they might have said.<sup>2</sup>

Let's remember from the past couple of weeks in the Gospel of Mark that we're nearing the end of Jesus's life as we find him today with his disciples. They have just exited the temple after watching the rich clang their sackfuls of coins in the treasury against the meager pennies of the widow. And though Mark doesn't tell us which of the disciples drew Jesus's attention to the large stones and large buildings, it's not a surprise that they were awestruck. Yet Jesus's response was surely surprising. He offers with a specific word of prediction: “you see these buildings? Well not one stone will be left here upon another.” Meaning: don't idolize the temple, for these walls will come down!

This isn't a new line of thinking in scripture; just listen to Jeremiah warn his people, “God will abandon the temple unless you live lives of justice in which you do not oppress the widow and the stranger and the orphan.” Or Micah saying, “It's not your sacrifices and your worship in the temple that I

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark, Westminster Bible Companion*, p168.

<sup>2</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, p322.

need. It is that you do justice and you love kindness and you walk humbly with your God.” Or even Jesus just days prior to today’s text driving the money-changers out of the temple while quoting Isaiah: “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers!”

The disciples could hardly have imagined such a thing. This was the Temple! The house of God! They couldn’t have imagined that just a few decades later, the Romans would invade and tear down that temple, stone by stone, with only the western wall remaining. They couldn’t have imagined what that would have meant for their people, how wholly that would have shaken their sense of place in the world, what the implications would be of a religion without a place, what new order was being born into life. “This is but the beginning of the birthpangs,” Jesus said.

### III.

With this framework in our minds, I want us to talk today about institutions. A widely accepted definition says, “institutions are both the formal and informal rules for how a society conducts itself.”<sup>3</sup> And one more I like says, “an institution is a system of rules, beliefs, norms, and organizations that together generate a regularity of behavior.”<sup>4</sup> Institutions are like the bumpers on a bowling alley that keep your bowling ball in the lane, or perhaps a bit more poetically, institutions are like the trails in a forest that reduce the overwhelming options of the wilderness to an intelligible path.<sup>5</sup> These norms give structure and shape to our life together in disciplines, traditions,

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<sup>3</sup> This version from Rajat Mi. Nag and Harinder S. Kohli, *From Here to Denmark: The Importance of Institutions for Good Governance*, p8. This is a fresh take on D. North’s *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* from 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Avner Greif, as quoted here: <https://patrickwyman.substack.com/p/what-are-institutions-and-why-are>

<sup>5</sup> One of my favorite reads of the last few years is Robert Moor’s *On Trails*, from which this idea comes.

organizations. Perhaps the most obvious place we feel institutions are in the private, public, and non-profit organizations that house these norms: the businesses, unions, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, legal professions, medical professions, religious organizations, journalism, nonprofit organizations, governments, agencies, communities, families, and the list goes on.

But you and I know that one of the most fundamental expressions of being a 21st century human – no matter who we are! – is to distrust institutions. You see it all around the globe, in every age, every gender, every nationality, every race, every background, and so on. And ‘distrust’ here conveys everything from a low-simmering frustration that flares when you have to wait too long at the doctor’s office and mouth off at their bad scheduling apparatus, through the sense that there has to be a better way when you’re mired in the bureaucracy of estate management, to the “burn it all down” sentiment that is directed toward our largest, biggest, most inescapable institutions when you feel forgotten by them.

We don’t distrust because we’re inherently a distrustful people. No, that distrust in institutions comes, at least in part, because we believe that they are not working as intended: meaning, working for the good of the people they’re claiming to serve. And when we find evidence to support those claims, it stokes our cynicism. Maybe we experience something we don’t understand, or stumble on a constraint we don’t like, or learn a piece of history we find disturbing. Perhaps it comes from our impatience or our indignation, but often the response is to say: institutions don’t deserve the benefit of the doubt. Cancel them. Throw them all out. Burn it all down.

Now let me be clear – this anti-institutionalist mentality isn't just the equivalent of a temper tantrum. No, plenty of institutions have earned our distrust with their corruption, right? Banks too big to fail, money laundering with fake checking accounts, golden parachutes for the executives while investors and customers are stiffed; convincing the public that asbestos is fine! and tobacco isn't addictive!; one politician's scandal after another, government shutdowns and impeachments and Watergate and every other "-gate," doping among Olympic athletes, stealing money intended for good, potholes and a once-in-a-generation global pandemic, and fallible human leaders who screw it all up, just to name a few. The church can be one of the worst offenders. Moving a priest accused of sexual assault from one parish to another, papering over problems with spiritual language, attributing bad behavior to "God's will," doggedly refusing to change, limiting whose voices have access – all of it might have even the most faithful Christian echoing Jesus with a fierce "throw it all down."

Cloak this distrust within the way institutional failure and societal change disorients us, then frame all of this within the four walls of our screens, and filter these stories through the newsmedia, talking heads, influencers, podcasters, and narrators who gleefully report on them because they know how easily anger and resentment and cynicism sells, and you have yourself a recipe for real trouble.

Now – as one for whom institutional care is, quite literally, in my DNA, alongside bad eyesight and motion sickness and hearty women on the Shannon side, I confess I'm an "institutional glass half full" kinda gal. I see their possibilities and potential, and have had a lifetime of meaningful connections that institutions fostered. Maybe you have as well. Yet as one

trying to find words to connect the good news of yesterday as lived and proclaimed by Jesus with the reality of today, I can't overlook just how fraught our American posture is towards institutions right now. American voters have said quite clearly: this isn't working for a majority of us. And I wonder what's underneath that.

Pastor Kyle shared a quote with me this week from author David Dark, who said, "an institution is just a story with a budget."<sup>6</sup> Or put another way, "institutions are just what relationships look like over time."<sup>7</sup> When reckoning with all of this, I have to wonder if, like the disciples marveling at the structure of the temple, we have misplaced the treasure for the jar. That we as a people – and even we as Christians! – have held up our order, our norms, our structures, our institutions – as wonderful as they are! – as sacrosanct, as the treasure instead of the jar, like walls of a temple we can't bear to consider crumbling. And when we do that, we stop listening to what Jesus is saying.

Because there that day, sitting on the Mount of Olives facing the temple, Jesus says to "watch" or "beware." Beware deception. Don't let someone lead you astray, someone claiming to be Messiah. "For you will hear of wars and rumors of wars," Jesus says. You will feel the earthquakes; you will see nation rise up against nation; you will ache with hunger in the famines. What you know and hold and treasure is falling away. But unlike another fallible human institution, I, Jesus, am bringing a whole new world into being. A new day is dawning. A new story is being told. (This one without a budget!) New norms are being discovered, and a new order is being made. One where there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male and female,

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Kyle for sharing this great quote!

<https://englewoodreview.org/david-dark-we-become-what-we-normalize-feature-review/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/books/pastor-s-disappointments>

for all are one in Christ Jesus. One where lilies of the field and birds of the air are models for presence. One where the last and the least and the lost are first in the dream of God for this world. One where the lost are found and the wayward come home. One of truth and grace, of beginning and end, of Alpha and Omega. One where Jesus shines brighter and purer than any temple wall. One where life in its utmost abundance is available for you and you and you and me. “The end is still to come... this is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” So do not be afraid.

#### IV.

On the eve of the Cold War back in 1952, the late pastor of The Riverside Church of the City of New York, Harry Emerson Fosdick, was speaking for students out at the Pacific School of Religion. In his address, he acknowledged how disorienting that era had been, the crises that punctuated it, the uncertainty that followed it. He could feel the fear in the room, these people whose understanding of the world had been utterly upended. And out of that time-bound talk came his timeless words: “The highest use of a shaken time is to discover the unshakable.”<sup>8</sup>

Friends, I want you to hear good news today. That when it feels like the stones are falling and the walls are crumbling and the ways of being in this world are being upended, remember the unshakeable. Remember the God who is our refuge and strength. Remember the prayer of George McLeod who prays to God, “We are your temple not made with hands. If every wall should crumble and every church decay, we are your habitation.”<sup>9</sup> Remember the God who places the divine tent among us in Jesus. Remember the Spirit

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<sup>8</sup> As told by George Mason, *The Word Made Fresh*, p216.

<sup>9</sup> McLeod was a leader in the formation of the Iona Community. I read about this prayer here: <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2012/111812.html>

who breathes life into even the deadest of places. Remember the gift of letting go and the grace of being found.

I don't believe God is asking us to step away from these institutions we've known and loved and celebrated. God is clear that our task is doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God. Caring for each other, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, releasing the oppressed. At their best, our institutions can be pathways to live out that call. But we cannot be felled by their failings. We must take heart in the long view. We cannot let our faces press up against the proverbial stones and buildings and all they represent, and prevent us from seeing the people they serve and sharing the long view of God: God who redeems all things, and is in all things, and loves this world from beginning to end.

## V.

Several years ago when we were standing at the precipice of tearing down two of our buildings, this text came up in the lectionary as it does in November every few years. I remember struggling to find words to talk about stones and buildings coming down. Not too long after that, our friend Paul Baxley, who grew up in these beloved buildings, shared this story with us.

As the story goes, a pilgrim was walking along a road when one day he passed what seemed to be a monk sitting in a field. Nearby men were working on a stone building.

"You look like a monk," the pilgrim said.

"I am that," said the monk.

"Who is that working on the abbey?"

"My monks," said the man, "I'm the abbot."

"It's good to see a monastery going up," said the pilgrim.



“They’re tearing it down,” said the abbot.

“Whatever for?” asked the pilgrim.

The abbot paused with a knowing smile.

“So we can see the sunrise at dawn.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> With gratitude to our friend, Rev. Dr. Paul Baxley, who shared this story at First Baptist on Fifth, encouraging us in our work. It is attributed to Johannes Tauler, German mystic and contemporary of Meister Eckhart.