

Our Gospel lesson is called Jesus' Lament Over Jerusalem. What makes Jesus sad about Jerusalem? He says "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." He says he'd like to gather the citizens of Jerusalem together, as a hen gathers her chicks, but they were not willing.

It is a terrible thing that Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets and rejects the Messiah. After all, it was King David who a thousand years earlier, moved the political capitol of Israel to Jerusalem, then brought the Ark of the Covenant, making it also the spiritual capitol. His son, King Solomon, built the Temple in Jerusalem so that the Ark, and God, might have a permanent home.

So, wouldn't you think that this would be the city that welcomed God's prophets and his Messiah? What went wrong?

A thousand years is a long time, and a whole lot can go wrong. But, probably the big thing that went wrong in Jerusalem would be the accumulation of power in the Temple. When too much earthly power settles in one place, the concern of that place slowly shifts away from its original purpose – whatever that purpose may be – to maintaining and increasing its power.

In this case, the people running the Temple had been seduced by the wealth and power that they found in the Temple. Instead of them serving the people of God through the Temple, they made the people serve them through the Temple.

So, when the prophets or the Messiah come into Jerusalem and challenge the claims of the Temple, the immediate reaction of the Temple would be to crush them. And it would do so in the name of God, thus justifying anything it did.

So, here comes Jesus, claiming authority that came directly from God, bypassing the Temple altogether. In his parables, rich men find themselves in hell, God seeks out and saves the lost, women are treated with respect. In short, Jesus offers an alternative to the Temple. And instead of hearing his message and saying, "Maybe he's right," the religious leaders look for ways to kill him. Their power, their authority, their cash cow must not be threatened. Those are more important than anything a prophet or Messiah might have to say.

This is a very clear warning for all of us who claim to be following Jesus, and do so through his church. It is very easy for a small group of enthusiastic Christians to grow into a church that turns its gaze inward, a church that is more concerned about the building than about the people outside who need to hear about the love of Christ and see it in action.

There always seems to be a conflict between form and substance. A church needs both, but it's a matter of which comes first, which is the primary job of the church.

Substance is the message and ministry of a church. It is the teachings, the life, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the call he has for all who take his name and follow him. It is the call to trust and obey, the call to take up the cross, the call to go out and make disciples for Christ. It is the call to love God, love our neighbors, love our enemies. It is the call to avoid judging other people. It is the call to pay attention to the Sermon on the Mount and to live by its teachings.

So, what the church does, what "organized religion" does, is give this spiritual substance a form. We gather for worship in our own building, but some churches meet in schools. Water's Edge started worshiping in the Fine Arts Center before they found their current location. We have stained glass windows and pews, but other churches have a gymnasium and folding chairs.

Churches need form to do worship, to do missions, to do Christian education, to help their members grow as disciples. But, sometimes the form overtakes the substance, and becomes a church's primary concern.

One concern about form at Jamieson that never seems to completely go away is the two worship services. The question needs to be about the substance, not the form. Are two services reaching more people than the single service did? Are the two services inspiring people who enjoy worshiping in different ways? Is Christ being served?

Issues of form often become sacred cows. Sacred cows are things that seem vitally important, but really aren't. I mentioned our stained glass windows and pews. What if next Sunday, you arrived at church to find the windows replaced by clear glass, and the pews replaced by folding chairs? What if the organ was replaced by an electronic keyboard?

Nobody wants to see these changes, but the fact is that the life of the church should not be dependent on these things. When a fire destroys a church building, does it destroy the church? No. And if the congregation and pastor are paying attention, they'll discover what's really important vs what seems to be important. And, when they rebuild, they can make adjustments that enhance the substance of their faith, rather than the form.

The Jerusalem that Jesus grieved over was all about form. The Temple that Solomon built to the glory of God (and the two subsequent Temples) had become primarily a source of revenue and a symbol of power for the few who ran things. The Temple had its own army, its own tax collectors. In Jesus' day, it was in collusion with the Romans, the empire that conquered and occupied their nation.

As a congregation, we face similar temptations. When our committees meet, they need to be considering the substance of our faith, our reason for being here at all. When we gather for worship, it should be for no other reason than praising God, thanking God, seeking God's will.

If we decide to concentrate on the substance of Christianity, the form will come. In architecture, form follows function, right? You build according to what you need to be doing in that building. In the church, form follows substance. Of course, we need to fix the roof, to stop all the leaks, to create a more accessible building, but the question must be "Why?"

Christ didn't die for our roof. He didn't die for a handicap accessible bathroom. He died because he loved us and because he wants us to love others as he loved us. A good roof and an accessible bathroom should serve that purpose. Stained glass window, pews and the organ should serve that purpose. If THEY BECOME the purpose, we have failed. Let's keep our eyes on the light of Jesus Christ, let's be determined to follow him, and our form – whatever it may be – will be perfect.