

Sermon Notes: Aug 24, 2025

Focus: Jesus in the synagogue

When I go to the airport, one of my favorite feelings comes with the first step off an assisted walkway. It is like walking on the moon for a moment. Coming off sabbatical has been a little bit like that. I have some moonwalk energy to share. Skip to page 4 if you don't want historical stuff. I did not make it past the first verse of the Gospel without falling into a rabbit hole and writing three pages to scratch that itch.

Luke 13:10 Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

I didn't really know what a synagogue is. I have been to modern Jewish worship. But what was a first century, Jewish worship space like? How was it organized?

Who "made" synagogues? There is no mention of synagogues in the Torah because the Temple was the center of Jewish life. Don't let that fool you. There were people who gathered for worship locally, but synagogues became explicitly essential to all Jewish people at an inflection point in history.

Starting around 605 BCE, Babylon forcibly scattered Jews from their land. Therefore, they couldn't reach the Temple -ever. Temple was eventually burned and flattened in 587 BCE, and the diaspora was then in full effect.

Small gatherings for prayer and study formed in foreign lands, becoming the prototype for synagogues during the Exile. By the time of Jesus and the Second Temple, local synagogues remained common even though Jewish people had returned from Exile. It just made sense to have norms for local worship, even with a new Temple.

Talmud and other traditions One writer calls Exile "the womb of the Talmud." These writings spell out how local Jews can start a synagogue with no denominational gatekeeper. All you need are committed Jews, a Torah scroll, and a place to gather.

You do need a minyan (10 adult Jews) to have communal prayer. A synagogue was not a "church plant" with clergy; rather it was a community initiative. If ten or more Jewish families lived in a place, they would pool resources to create this gathering space. Leadership in early synagogues was regularly lay led. I am surprised by how non-clerical these communities were. This research reminds me how "clerical" my own worldview is. It is important to note that there are key leaders of synagogues, and it is not a free-for-all.

Archisynagogos

The ruler of the synagogue: an elected community leader, not necessarily a rabbi.

Hazzan

caretaker, who sometimes led prayers.

Readers and teachers

rotated, depending on who was learned in Torah.

Rabbis

primarily teachers and legal authorities; they didn't serve as "pastors." A synagogue could exist without a rabbi. And sometimes Archisynagogos was honored to have traveling preachers coming in like Jesus.

Types of synagogues:

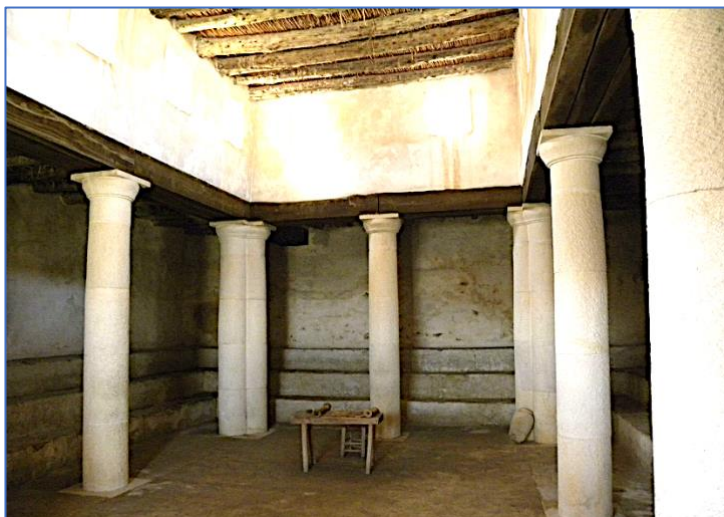
First, there were two major types of synagogues in the Bible:

Public and Associative

Associative: A "freedmen's" synagogue (community of freed slaves who chose to gather) would be an example of an associative community. This was likely *not* the type of synagogue that Luke 13 is describing. It was a close-knit and more closed group.

Public: A public synagogue was open to local and traveling people. Worship was sort of like a local town hall mixed with scripture and worship. A typical worship space had benches all facing the center. After some singing and Torah reading, everyday people, visiting Rabbi, and /or itinerant gurus could teach and comment.

Wikimedia describe this picture as "a typical synagogue from the first century CE,



based on sites excavated so far in the Holy Land. The banked seating would wrap around three or four sides of the single large room.

It seems there were no permanent tables or "pulpits" in these buildings, so Torah readings were probably done from a small portable table and chair/stool like the wooden ones pictured here."

Christian egalitarian space the only rough modern equivalent of this synagogue style in Christianity is in a Quaker meeting house. There does not need to be an Altar in the space, and all the pews can face in toward an empty center space. In an “old school” Quaker meeting, there will be opening worship and then waiting for God to prompt anyone to speak, teach or prophesy. It is very disorienting if you expect to march through a liturgy.

Wadsworth Quaker meeting house →



The leader of the synagogue indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, " There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

Freedom Out of the freedom in Jesus’ ministry, a woman was healed, and the community was electrified. The only person annoyed was the one trying to maintain order. I noticed that the Archisynagogos did not directly try to shut down Jesus. He implored the people to do something about this infraction of custom. He feels a little bit like a paper tiger.

Did Jesus need permission to teach? I am still processing how synagogues functioned and don’t fully understand how Jesus was able to stand up and teach in different synagogues, especially with how much the Bible describes the contempt synagogue leaders had for him.

One perspective: the synagogue leader was so wowed by Jesus’ miracles he felt like he needed to let Jesus speak up but then regretted it. Another view: there was an egalitarian spirit, Quaker-Ish, and Jesus, like others, had the authority to speak - even over the ruffled feathers of leadership. I still don’t know what is right.

Muddying the water even further: development over decades

People were writing down the life and times of Jesus in the first century. Some synagogue communities had soured on Jesus’ followers by the middle of the century. In line with human nature, the Jesus followers thought “you don’t like us, you probably never liked Jesus, and therefore you are reprobate hypocrites.” Whatever friction Jesus had with synagogues, other Rabbi, and leaders was probably amplified as the decades passed.

Today

What in the world do synagogues and governance this have to do with us today? In the Episcopal Church we won't ever look like a quaker meeting house. We won't turn all the pews to face each other while we wait in silence for the spirit. But we could use a dose of that egalitarian vibe.

If some Christian influencer came randomly to St. Timothy's expecting to preach, I would be highly inclined to **not** let them. But I wonder what I would miss. Are we making a barrier that Jesus does not construct?

Episcopalians have a hard time functioning week in and out without clergy. Yet, what if the organizational model of the synagogue helped us reimagine lay people taking back what is ultimately theirs:

- a local community supporting each other
- worshipping together
- taking care of each other
- serving those around them

This research has made me think a lot about who I am as a priest. There is an Old Testament passage that is part of the ordination vows for an Episcopal priest. In Numbers 11, Moses wants help: God answers and calls a group of elders to Moses in the tent to pour out spiritual power:

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied...

the ordination text cuts off there, but..

*Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp...but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp...Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them! "But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? **I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!**"*

O that we would be free to speak and act in the power of God's love.

O that we would know our authority.

O that we would all jump in the middle of St. Timothy's
making sanctuary and refuge for anyone who seeks it.

Thanks for reading!
Todd