

“Evicting the Money Changers”
The Rev. Sue Redfern-Campbell
UU Church of Columbia, MO
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A reading from the Gospel of Mark (11:15-19)

Cande Iveson, Worship Associate

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple. And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written,
‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?
‘But you have made it a den of robbers.’”

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

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Homily

Suzanne Redfern-Campbell, Interim Minister

And he entered the temple, and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying...And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves...

So who, exactly, were the money changers and dove sellers? And what, exactly, did Jesus have against them?

The story of Jesus entering the temple is one of the stories told during Lent, the time leading up to Good Friday and Easter. It is one of the best known stories in the Bible. It is also, in my opinion, a story that speaks directly to our own time, and to the condition in which we find ourselves as a nation. But as with many other “best known” stories, it lends itself to frequent misinterpretation.

The temptation is always there to lift this story out of its historical context, and with biblical passages this is always a mistake. It is a mistake because it leaves us with no good tools to interpret the passage, and we are left either to guess about its significance, or to interpret it solely through the lens of our own time - a lens that would have been foreign to the biblical storytellers.

For example: Some Christians interpret the story of Jesus and the money-changers to mean that Jesus was anti-Jewish, and that his act in the Temple was a protest against all Jewish practice and

customs. But in fact, Jesus was a faithful Jew - he was never anything else. Any actions he took, were taken as a Jew, and must be understood as such.

Closer to home, perhaps, other interpreters take Jesus' actions as a protest against the religious practice of animal sacrifice. Now, this might be a worthy protest. And indeed, the money changers and dove sellers were in the Temple so that people could purchase birds and animals for the Passover sacrifice. The problem with this interpretation is that there's not much evidence elsewhere in the Gospels to indicate that this was Jesus' agenda.

A third common belief is that Jesus was "cleansing the Temple" of money - that he thought money was inherently corrupt, and therefore should not be present in houses of worship. Building on that interpretation, some people cite the passage to critique congregational fundraising drives, including fundraising tables in church vestibules on Sunday morning.

But I really don't think Jesus' was worried about church bazaars. The trouble with all the interpretations I've named so far, including that one, is that they ignore a key element in the gospels: namely, their political backdrop. That political backdrop, of course, was the ever present occupation of Judea by the Roman Empire - a totalitarian state that taxed its peasant subjects into poverty, and co-opted the highest Jewish authorities, and brutally repressed those who got in its way.

As biblical scholar Marcus Borg suggested when he spoke in Columbia, there were *two* processions entering Jerusalem in 30 AD, on the day we now call "Palm Sunday." From the East came Jesus and his band of peasant followers. And from the West came a legion of Caesar's army, led by Pontius Pilate, the imperial governor. They were coming to maintain law and order, just in case there was trouble, as there often was during Passover.

An ever present tendency in modern times is to "spiritualize" the gospels - that is, to suggest that Jesus' words and actions were apolitical, and exclusively religious. But the idea of separating politics and religion is a modern idea. It would have made no sense at all in any biblical context, including first century Palestine.

Back then, the religious and the political were one and the same. The important question was *whose* politics, and whose religion, should prevail? Should it be the domination system of Caesar's reign, with its governor Pontius Pilate, and its client king Herod? Or should it be what Jesus and the gospel writers called "the kingdom of God" - the reign of justice, love, and peace that subverts all domination systems?

Marcus Borg and Dominick Crossan suggest that Jesus' action in the temple was a pre-planned symbolic act - a piece of political theater. It was not meant to "cleanse" the temple of money changers. Rather, Jesus' aim was really to shut the entire temple operation down, symbolically speaking.

And why did Jesus want to do this? Not because he found something intrinsically wrong with the temple, and not even because buying and selling was going on in one of its courtyards. The problem was that the temple had become co-opted, and was serving to legitimate Caesar's reign. It had become, in short, an instrument of oppression.

As Borg and Crossan write, "The conflict is...not about priests and sacrifice...Rather, [Jesus'] protest was against a domination system legitimated in the name of God, a domination system radically different from what the...kingdom of God, the dream of God, would be like."

If Borg and Crossan are right, that Jesus' temple action was a symbolic act of political theatre, we can then go on to ask, "What else, if anything, does this remind us of? Does it sound like any contemporary actions that we know about?"

If "Occupy Wall Street" comes to your mind, then it sounds as though our minds are thinking alike. Jesus staged an action against a system that was rewarding the rich and powerful - the 1% of his day - and robbing the poor and the vulnerable. Mark tells us, too, that "the whole crowd" was responsive - "spellbound by his teaching."

Last fall, in fact, the British newspaper the *Guardian* made the comparison with the "Occupy" Movement - when U.S. protesters were occupying Zuccotti Park, and their British counterparts were camped at St. Paul's Cathedral. Columnist Terry Eagleton wrote,

"Jesus would probably have understood what those currently shivering outside St. Paul's are up to. They have certainly managed to throw the ruling caste of a holy place into an unholy panic, just as he did. And to that extent they are his followers, however much some of them may understandably despise religion."

Now, I really don't think the Bible is meant to be a proof-text. It doesn't give us a prescription for what should be done in our own time. But it can be a powerful spur to our imagination, as we engage in the struggles of today.

Who are today's "money changers?" Here in Missouri, I don't think we need to look any farther than the strip malls where the "payday lenders" have set up shop. If Jesus were around today, he might have had some interesting things to say about them.

These are the companies that make loans, at triple-digit interest rates or higher, to financially vulnerable people. No doubt you've seen their storefronts around Columbia. Perhaps, like me, you've even gotten a letter from one of them, inviting you to come in and get some cash! What the letters don't tell you, of course, is that you'll be repaying this loan at some 400% interest.

Nationwide, payday loan companies have mushroomed, from around 2000 in 1996 to some 22,000 in 2008. And because of its lenient usury laws, Missouri has become one of the havens. The average interest rate here is around 400%, but the law allows for almost 2000% on some

short-term loans. According to the Consumer Federation of America, borrowers are typically female, make around \$25,000 a year, rent rather than own their home, and are more likely to be people of color than is the general population.

If these high-interest loans served the purpose the loan companies say they do - providing short-term loans to cover unforeseen emergencies between paychecks - it would be one thing (though perhaps still not okay). What happens instead, according to consumer advocates, is that the exorbitant interest rates sink people into a "debt trap" of chronic borrowing. One study shows that the lenders get 90% of their revenue from people who can't pay their loans when due.

Telling, I think, is a statement from workers at the Catholic charity St. Vincent de Paul: If someone comes to them needing \$200 to tide them over in an emergency, the charity can help with a grant or 3% loan. But if that person comes only after defaulting on a payday loan, helping them becomes much more difficult.

"I get calls daily from people who are in trouble with payday lenders," says a St. Vincent development director. "I had a family that took out a payday loan for car repairs and had problems repaying the loan. We got involved a year later and I found that, with all of the penalties and fees, the family had paid over \$1,200 and still owed the original \$200. Can you imagine paying over \$1,200 in interest for a \$200 loan?"

It's stories like these that have led state representative Mary Still to start a "Cap the Rate" ballot initiative, which would set the maximum loan interest rate at 36%. And it's stories like these that have moved local religious communities to get behind this initiative, along with a companion one to raise the minimum wage. Not surprisingly, payday lenders are fighting this initiative tooth and nail.

People of faith in Columbia are going out into the community to collect signatures, to get "Cap the Rate" on the ballot. Members of our Social Action Committee have become part of this effort - which must be completed by the end of April. They will be in the greeting area after the service, with clipboards and petitions. If you are a registered voter, and if you are so moved, they invite you to sign the petition - and even to join the move to collect signatures.

It's small but significant steps like this, I think, that over time will allow us to evict today's "money changers" from the Temple.

Only then will we reclaim our country as a place of liberty and justice for all.

And only then will we be able to say with confidence, "This land was made for you and me" - and "Let justice roll down like waters - and righteousness like a mighty stream."