

“SONGS OF THE SAVIOR: II – ‘LORD OF THE DANCE’”

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Mark 11:15-19

It was Easter time one year when a woman and her mother took a trip to see her sister, who was going through a really tough time. They spent time with her, and when Easter Sunday came, they decided to go to church together. Just before they were ready to leave, the sister backed down, and said she couldn't go – it was just too much for her. Undaunted, the other sister and mother got in the car and drove to the nearest church, very excited to participate in the joy of Easter, but also very much needing the prayer and solace of the church as they tried to help their dear one who was hurting so.

When they got to the parking lot, it was jam packed, but they finally found a spot, and made their way into the building. They got to the door of the sanctuary and were just about to open it when an usher rushed over to stop them. “There's no room left,” he said. “There's no room for you.”

Now, I know it wasn't the usher's fault, but maybe he could have chosen better words than “there's no room for you,” because these women were crestfallen. When they needed the church and the message of Easter the most, the message that says no matter what, it's going to be okay, instead the message they got was “there's no room for you.”

In much the same way, the poor people in this morning's Gospel lesson were getting the same message from the people in the temple at Jerusalem. Oh, they weren't exactly being told “there's no room for you,” but actually, in subtle (or maybe not so subtle) ways they were.

Let me explain, because this is what made Jesus so angry that day – so angry that he caused quite a scene by upsetting the moneychangers' tables.

To enter the temple in those days, you had to bring an offering – actually several offerings. You had to bring a financial offering, and it had to be in the right kind of coin – the coin of the realm. You also had to bring a sacrificial offering – an animal offering – and it had to be of the best quality.

So here come the poor to worship, and perhaps they had some coin, but it wasn't the right kind; and perhaps they had an animal, but it wasn't the right quality. Enter the dealers, the moneychangers. They were more than willing to

help these poor people out – for a price, mind you. Sure, they could exchange your money for the right kind of money, but at an exorbitant rate! And sure, they could provide you with a pure, perfect animal for the sacrifice, but it would cost you a pretty penny.

At every turn, they were taking huge advantage of the poor, who simply wanted to come and worship. They were, in effect, saying to them, if you're not willing to pay the piper for these things you need to get into the temple, then you're out of luck – there's no room in the temple for you! It was injustice at its worst.

And Jesus refused to stay silent about it! With righteous indignation he stood in the court of the temple and denounced those practice and the people who were carrying them out. And, as you might imagine, those people didn't like it one bit, and added it to the list of things that they held against Jesus – the things that would lead them to, in the not too distant future, have him arrested and tried and put to death on the cross.

You see, he upset the apple cart. They had a well-oiled machine there, a system that had worked for them forever. They were lining their pockets very well, thank you very much, and now, here he comes threatening their wealth. Who did he think he was?

Well, he knew who he was, and what he was doing. He was doing what the scriptures from the very beginning call us to do – and that is to care for the last, the lost and the least, the vulnerable, widows, orphans, the poor. It's so much easier to look the other way, but that's not what we're called to do and that's not what Jesus did. He took the risk to speak out on their behalf, and that's what we're called to do as well.

Pastor and preacher Tony Campolo says that we in the church are really good at caring for the last, lost and least, the poor and needy, but we're not so good at advocating for them. Listen to some of his words: "Christians do an excellent job of being Good Samaritans. Whenever the social system grinds out casualties, we pick up those casualties, patch up their wounds, and send them back to take their place in the system once again. But it does very little to try to change the system itself."

He continues: "It has been said that the church is God's ambulance squad. We're good at that sort of thing. But sooner or later we have to do more than just help those who fall victim to the abuses of an unjust and oppressive society. Sooner or later, there comes a point at which the call of God is to change the system itself." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, "Overhearing What God Wants Us to Do in the World," p. 115)

He's right, yet it's a tall order, and it's a risky one. An archbishop in Brazil named Dom HelderCamara once said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." (On-line, "The Power of Anger," Rev. Abernethy, Wapping Church, South Windsor, CT)

He's right. When you start speaking up against injustice or oppression, and challenge people and systems to change, it's really risky. The people who are benefiting from the system as it is don't like it, and will sometimes strike back. Others just don't want you upsetting the apple cart, making waves. They'd rather you just let things be.

Jesus couldn't do it that day in the temple. He couldn't take it any more. He couldn't stand the barriers that were being put up for those who were vulnerable and simply wanted to worship in the temple.

As we continue on our Lenten journeys, I think this Gospel lesson invites us to think about the vulnerable populations around us today. Who are they, with what are they struggling, and is the system keeping them down? And if it is, what should we, as followers of the one who overturned the moneychangers' tables, be doing about it?

Should we be speaking up to a world where those who are poor can't go to work in minimum wage jobs because they get more in income on welfare?

Should we be speaking up to a world where veterans, who have given their all to serve our country, come back and can't find jobs, often finding themselves homeless?

Should we be speaking up to a world where race, or ethnic background, or gender, causes people to be treated as less than equal?

Should we be speaking up to a world where politicians and bureaucrats in Washington will live out the rest of their lives with cushy pensions and health insurance, while so many millions of others will struggle to get by as they grow older?

Jesus could no longer stand by and watch people being used and abused. And when he spoke up, it cost him dearly. You heard about it in the hymn we sang, "I danced on the Sabbath, and I cured the lame, the holy people said it was a shame, they whipped and they stripped and they hung me high; and they left me there on a cross to die." (Lord of the Dance, UMH 261)

When he didn't follow the rules society had set up, it cost Jesus his life, but he could do no other, it was what God called him to do. And so it is with us. As his

followers, we are called to work for that day when all of God's children are treated well, when all of God's children know that there's room for them in this world.

So, now, for a few moments on this Lenten journey, I want to invite us to a time of silence and contemplation. In your bulletin, is an insert on which you'll see a man walking a tightrope. Take it out, and find something with which to write – a pen or a pencil. I'll give you a minute to do that. There's just one copy this week – for you.

Now, think for a few minutes about those who are vulnerable in our world. Who would it be, in our world today, whose situation is such that Jesus would get angry, and speak out sharply, and do something about it? Then, having identified who they are, answer this: what can we, as Jesus' hands and feet in the world today, do?