

“WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE: IV – RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION!”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
March 11, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Mark 11:15-19

No doubt, you have probably heard the old saying, “Things are not always as they seem.” Well that is absolutely true when it comes to today’s Gospel lesson – things are not as they seem when you take them at face value. Let me explain.

In the passage, we read how Jesus goes into the temple, does not like what he sees there, and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. At face value, it looks like he doesn’t like the temple being treated like a marketplace. That’s what it looks like at face value.

But that’s actually not the whole story. Let me let a Lutheran pastor by the name of Barbara Lundblad explain. I’m not sure how old she is, but I’m guessing from the following comments she made, that she’s in her 70’s. Here’s what she had to say about the meaning of this passage:

“It’s not about bingo. Maybe that never occurred to you, but when I was growing up (she writes), this Gospel reading often brought bingo to mind. Oh, it wasn’t the game itself – it was the notion of playing bingo to raise money for the church. Looking back, I think it was more about Catholics than about bingo. We Protestants had picked up an anti-Catholic bias in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Parents worried that their sons or daughters might marry Roman Catholics. And when John Kennedy ran for president, some worried that the pope would soon be running America. We were suspicious of Roman Catholics even though there wasn’t a Catholic church in my small Iowa town. Bingo was further proof that the Catholics were up to no good because they played bingo in church and Lutherans didn’t. We were always waiting for Jesus to come and overturn the bingo tables, sending the cards flying all over the church basement and spilling the little numbers out of the cage that spun them around. ‘Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!’ Jesus would shout as he tipped over the cash boxes. We were quite sure that Jesus would not have been upset with the oyster stew supper or the strawberry festival to raise money for missions.”

“But (she continued), it’s not about bingo. Jesus’ disruption that day in the temple was a powerful sign of Jesus’ disruption of the way things were.” (On-line, Barbara K. Lundblad, “Far More Than Bingo,” Union Theological Seminary, 3/23/03)

She's right, for too long, we've been willing to think this was just about people treating the temple as a marketplace, but it was oh, so much deeper than that. It was, in the end, about people, and the way they were being treated in that supposedly holy place.

Let me explain what was happening. This was at the time of the Passover festival - a time when many, many people made a pilgrimage to the temple. They came from far and wide. When they came to worship, part of that was making a sacrifice, of an animal. Some of them, those well off, had animals and brought them with them. But others didn't. And so, since they had not brought the animals with them, they had to buy them, and in order to buy them, they had to have the right kind of money, so off they would go to the moneychangers to make their exchange.

And the moneychangers were, in the best case, taking advantage of the most vulnerable, and in the worst case, outright cheating them, making their own rules, calling their own shots, making sure through their unethical practices that "people were kept in their place, or at least knew their place."

And in so doing, those moneychangers were in their own way putting walls up between those people and God, letting some in, keeping some out, calling some worthy, and others unworthy.

And that's what made Jesus mad. That people were being ranked in order of worth and importance, and treated that way. The temple, that had been so precious to him all of his life, was being used as an instrument of alienation and separation, of power and control, and he hated it, and showed them so that day.

Except for the fact that it was a bit shocking (we rarely hear about Jesus losing his temper), the people should not have been surprised by what Jesus did – because he spent his entire life reaching out to those society deemed "less than." Search the scriptures and you'll see it – Jesus touching lepers, Jesus casting out demons, Jesus eating with sinners. You even hear it in his words, his stories of unlikely heroes, like the Good Samaritan, and of abounding grace toward a wayward, sinful son. In so many ways, in everything he said and did, Jesus broke down barriers and opened his arms wide with God's love for all.

So on that day, Jesus was doing what he had always done, but it seems that he had reached the limit of his patience, because he angrily took on the injustice going on right in front of him, in God's house.

I wish I could say that, after that day and what Jesus did, the church listened to him and became more inclusive and loving, but it has, at times, struggled to do so. Look over the centuries, and you will see that, far too often, the church bought into societal norms rather than God's. For instance, the church for way too long

didn't speak up against slavery. The great Frederick Douglass, freed slave who fought that all might be free, once made this incredibly sad statement: "The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master." (J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Preaching About People*, "Frederick Douglass, p. 99)

For far too long, the church, while it may not have sanctioned slavery, certainly put up with it, and stayed largely silent.

And for far too long, the church made women second class citizens, trying to keep them in their place, stilling their voices and carving out special places for them, one of which was never leadership. It wasn't until 60 years ago that women were allowed to be ordained in the Methodist Church.

Talk to some young people. I daresay over the years they have felt under-appreciated at church. Oh, they know we like having them around, but don't really feel like we think they matter much. (Don't shoot the messenger, that's what I've been told!)

And now, our United Methodist denomination, is in the midst of another struggle, over human sexuality and in particular, over the LGBTQ community's place in the church. Are they in or are they out? And if they're in, what can they do or not do? Can they be ordained or not? Can they be married or not? Can our clergy officiate at their weddings? It's a struggle that we're right in the middle of, and I wonder what Jesus thinks of it.

Friends, sadly, in the church and in the world, systems are in place designed to keep people in their place, and they stay that way because the ones calling the shots, like those moneychangers of old, benefit from it. They get to stay on top, they get to make the decisions, or make the money.

I think Jesus is calling the church to stand up against those systems that divide and hurt people, especially those who are vulnerable. I think he's calling us to have righteous indignation and stand up against those systems.

Tony Campolo made a very interesting observation one day when he said: "Christians do an excellent job at being Good Samaritans. Whenever the social system grinds out casualties, the church is more than ready to pick up those casualties, patch up their wounds and send them back to their place in the system once again. But it does very little to try to change the system itself."

He continues: "The story of the Good Samaritan describes a good man who rescues someone who, while traveling on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem, falls among thieves. We all know the story of how the man is battered and beaten and left for dead, and how the Good Samaritan comes and picks him up and

cleanses his wounds and takes him to a place where he can be cared for and nurtured back to health. It's a moving story and inspires us all to do good works.

The thing we must bear in mind is that the Good Samaritan did the right thing when he picked up the bandits' victim, but if every day two or three people get mugged on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, there comes a point when we must realize that being Good Samaritans is not enough. At some point, if such crimes abound, we have to figure out how to put up a better lighting system on the road and perhaps have it patrolled by police, and put an end to people being mugged on that dangerous highway. In short, it's one thing to care for the casualties from the system, but sooner or later, we have to change the system so as to not have so many casualties in the first place." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, "Changing the System," p. 115)

On that day in the temple, Jesus called out the system, and named their abuse of the vulnerable for what it was, and in so doing, he called the world to love the way God loves, to see all people as persons of worth and value, to be treated with dignity, respect and equality. He called the world to, like that precious children's book said, build people up, fill their buckets, care for them, support them.

It was a risky thing for him to do, because through his act of righteous indignation he made the people in power more mad at him than ever, because it was a threat to their power, control and in some cases, income; and in the end, their anger boiled over to such an extent that they would take his life on a cruel cross at Calvary.

But he was willing to pay the price out of love for those whom God loved.

As those who follow him, who call ourselves his disciples, are we willing to follow his lead, and stand up for all of God's people, and especially the last, the lost and the least? Will we have the courage to show righteous indignation when we see injustice and oppression?

Those are the questions I think Jesus' actions on that day call us to consider on this day. Who in our world today needs us to stand up for them and to speak out for them that they might live the life God intended them to have, and how will we go about doing that?

As the hymn we're about to sing says, "Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gifts to all inspire, but have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass and hopeless gain." May we, as a church and as individuals, love in such a way that all God's people will know that they belong and they matter. May it be so.

Amen.

