

## *A Fitting Tribute*

Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday January 14, 2018  
Bill Chadwick Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Over the next few weeks I will be using the relatively new Narrative Lectionary, which has us in John's gospel. Because of MLK Sunday today I switched next week's gospel with today's, a much more pertinent passage.

Listen for God's word to us. John 2:13-16

*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple (courtyard) he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple (courtyard), both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"*

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild?" Something has really set Jesus off. He is ticked! What's going on here?

A little background. Passover was the largest and grandest of the three big annual Jewish feasts. Passover was, and is, the celebration of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, about 1200 years before Jesus. By Jesus' day, it was mandated that every adult Jewish male who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem was required to come for Passover each year. And for those who lived farther away, they came as often as they could, certainly at least once in a lifetime was everyone's dream. So each year at Passover, there would be great throngs of Jewish pilgrims crowding into the city from all over the Mediterranean world.

During the week of Passover, the worshipper would pay a temple tax. Let me try to put the amount of that tax into today's figures. Could we say that a minimum wage laborer today would make about \$75/day? Then in today's wages the Temple tax would be perhaps \$125. This tax had to be paid in the local Jewish currency because the coinage couldn't have an image on it or it would be in violation of the commandment against graven images. So people from far away would have to change their money into the local currency.

Second, the worshipper would be required to offer an animal in sacrifice, a pair of doves if one were poor, all the way up to an ox if one were wealthy. And you couldn't bring your old, sick animal to sacrifice; it had to be healthy and without blemish. If you didn't own an animal or didn't want to bring it with you all the way from home, you could purchase one from the Temple authorities for your sacrifice. Got the picture?

Okay. This has been going on for centuries. What was Jesus so upset about? There are at least four possibilities.

1. Some scholars believe that Jesus was symbolically demonstrating that the whole paraphernalia of animal sacrifice was unnecessary. The religious status quo needed upsetting and replacing. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, “It’s not important at which location you worship God, the Samaritan Temple near the city of Shechem, or the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, for the time is coming to worship God in spirit and in truth.” So the subject of Jesus’ anger was the religious status quo.

If that is so, then we might ask ourselves, “What in our religious life today might cause Jesus the same sort of anger? In order to minister to the young people of 2018, what sorts of things might we old-timers need to let go? Which of our cherished traditions are hindering our ministry to young folks today?” I don’t have anything specific in mind, but I believe that it is a question that should always be before us.

The next three reasons given for Jesus to be so upset are more obvious.

Reason number 2. The moneychangers and the animal sellers right there in the Temple courtyard. Imagine if we had a bunch of people selling Palestinian olive oil and coffee and poinsettias right there in the narthex of the church building...Oh, never mind. I’m totally joking.

Seriously now, what if, in the back row of the sanctuary, the Cal Chadwick Memorial Pew, what if we had loud money-changing AND a whole bunch of animals mooing and cooing, baa-ing and bleating, pooping and peeing? Would it be hard to worship, to give God appropriate reverence?

For these worship practices to take place, yes it was necessary to have coins and to have animals, but did all this have to happen in the very courtyard of the Temple? Move it a block away, for heaven’s sake. For worship’s sake.

3. Here is how the Temple was laid out. Unlike Presbyterians, people wanted to be down front for worship. But there was nothing democratic about worship in that day. There was a definite hierarchy: priests near the Holy of Holies, then Jewish men, then farther away Jewish women, and finally, the outer ring was the Courtyard of the Gentiles. There were thousands of Gentiles, non-Jews, who were attracted to Judaism. They liked the monotheism and the ethics of Judaism, and they sought to worship Yahweh. They were given this place at the outside edge of the Temple precincts for their worship.

Guess where the market was taking place? You got it. The Courtyard of the Gentiles. In Mark’s version of this incident, Jesus cried, “My house shall be a house of prayer for *all the nations*; but you have made it a den of robbers.” (Mark 11:7) “...for all the nations”! But the nations had to contend with the marketplace set up in the only area allowed for their worship!

The living word for us today: Is there anything in our church life that keeps the seeking stranger out, that makes one feel uncomfortable or unwelcome?

4. Reason #4 for Jesus to be so upset simple... skullduggery! Again, in the gospel of Mark, Jesus said, “My house shall be a house of prayer for all the nations; but you have made it a *den of robbers*.”

What’s this “den of robbers” business? It has to do both with the changing of the money and with the purchasing of animals for the sacrifice.

The temple tax was about \$125 and it had to be paid in the local currency, so if you were a pilgrim from another country you had to change your money, just like we do when we travel internationally. We can change our money at the airport when we arrive, or we can change it at the hotel, or the best deal for us is at an independent moneychanger in the city. But in Jesus’ day the religious hierarchy had a monopoly on the money-changing business. The only place to change your money was at the Temple and they could charge whatever they wanted. So, to change \$125 worth of your money for the Temple tax you had to pay a surcharge of \$75. A day’s wage for a laborer! Robbery.

And then the sale of animals. Yes, it was a service to have them for sale right there, but again it was a monopoly. The animals for sale inside the Temple courtyard might cost ten or fifteen times as much as the usual cost. Bare-faced extortion. And remember, the sacrificial animals were required to be perfect, without blemish. You might try to bring your own sheep or goat or ox to be sacrificed, but what are the chances that you could drive an animal 50 or 100 miles without it picking up a nick or two? And even if you did, you had to get it by the Temple inspectors, who might themselves make a nick as they inspect your animal, so that it wouldn’t pass inspection and then you had to buy one from them. Crooks! Exploitation!

So Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove them and the animals out!

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Let’s take one minute and look at that word “meek.” In the Beatitudes, the very heart of Jesus’ message, he declared, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Would you like to be described as meek? Probably not. But some of you might recall that the Greek word translated as “meek” is “praus.” And one of the classic definitions of praus is this: praus describes the person who is never angry at the wrong time...and is always angry at the right time.

What’s the wrong time to be angry? When another driver cuts us off. When our child spills the milk. When we have to wait a while in the DMV line. In short, when *WE* are inconvenienced is the wrong time to be angry.

What's the right time to be angry? When the local mosque is bombed. When people are judged by the color of their skin and not by the content of their character. When the President and Congress cater to their rich cronies and cut services to the poor and children go hungry.

(Yes, I'm going to talk politics. Before I go on, let me say this: For those of you not familiar with the US tax code, the only thing forbidden a preacher is to endorse a particular candidate. All other "political" talk is allowed and protected. And I would once again remind you that Jesus died on the cross as a *political criminal*. For me to be silent in the face of what is going on in this country would require me to be unfaithful to Jesus.)

Today we seek to honor Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist preacher who understood that the followers of Jesus are not called to be nice. We are called to be faithful.

King lamented: "How often the church has been an echo rather than a voice, a taillight behind the Supreme Court and other secular agencies, rather than a headlight guiding (people) progressively and decisively to higher levels of understanding." (*Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 98.

If Jesus were just nice he would not have ended up on a cross. How did he end up on a cross? He upset the status quo. Following the example of the Old Testament prophets, he said life wasn't about making money. What *was* important, was how we treated the poor and the powerless, the refugees among us. Jesus said even sinners and prostitutes and women and gentiles were welcome in the kin-dom of God. His was a message of inclusivity.

Jesus did not construct walls...amen? He broke them down, declaring the unity of the human family. For in the family of God, there is no such thing as "those people" and "our own" people. Not in the family of God. If Jesus taught us anything, it is that in God's family there are no borders. There certainly are no "shithole countries."

For the President of the United States to describe African countries and Haiti with that term takes one's breath away. And *when* he did it: on the eve of the eighth anniversary of the Haiti earthquake that killed 220,000 people, and days before we celebrate the achievements of Martin Luther King. The blatant racism of favoring immigrants from Norway over those from Africa and Haiti...

I have been to Haiti...twice. I have worked with communities of people who were joining together to provide a regular supply of clean water, people who were joining together to build homes and schools and hospitals. I have hiked with them and sung with them and worshipped with them, our Christian sisters and brothers. I have seen the dignity and the hard work and the humanity of these people and I would be happy to have them as my neighbors.

On January 9<sup>th</sup> the President said the new DACA bill should be about "love." Hallelujah.

But two days earlier he had announced the end of deportation protection for Salvadorans living in the US. If he goes through with it, he will be condemning many to death.

The President has repeatedly decried the violence of the gangs in El Salvador, yet a week ago decided to send 200,000 Salvadorans living in the US back to that violence. Many of those people have lived in the US since the Salvadoran earthquakes 17 years ago. Others have fled the outrageous violence. Today they have settled here. They have jobs and families and are a part of the fabric of this country.

What is he sending them back to? El Salvador has the highest murder rate in the world, 20 times that of the US. To put it in perspective, that rate of murder would mean a murder every six weeks.... in Bloomington. The gangs maintain a menacing presence in 247 of 262 municipalities, well over 90%. They extort about 70 percent of businesses. They dislodge entire communities from their homes, and help propel thousands of Salvadorans to undertake dangerous journeys to flee the violence. (NY Times Nov 21, 2016)

When the President wants to wrench 200,000 former Salvadorans out of their homes and back to that kind of violence, it's up to the followers of Jesus to be meek: to be angry at the right time, to say NO.

Remember the famous line from Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good (people) to do nothing."

I'm not a Haitian or an African. I'm not a Salvadoran or a Mexican.

But I am a Christian. And I will not be silent while this racist President once again brings shame on America, this country I love with all my heart. If not now, *when* is the time to be angry? Let us work, pray, give money, organize, stand up and speak out for justice.

In honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. and in faithfulness to Jesus, I will not be silent.

What about you?