

Jesus and the Money Changers, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L3090315
Psalm 19 and John 2:13-22
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 15 March, 2009

Prayer: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.¹

For years, I have glibly used the story of overturning the tables of the moneychangers as an example of Jesus' getting angry. I have said that Jesus experienced all human emotion including anger. If Jesus got angry, it is acceptable for us to get angry. We just should be careful that we express our anger in positive ways.

I still hold to that teaching, however this story of Jesus' overturning the tables of the moneychangers is much more significant than a simple example of human anger. All four gospels contain this story. John's version includes more graphic details: at the tables in the temple, people sold cattle, sheep, and doves. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not include the whip of cords. Those three, the "synoptic gospels," present this event near the end of Jesus' ministry, during Holy Week, the last week of his life. While in Matthew and Luke Jesus cleanses the temple on Palm Sunday evening, in Mark he entered the temple on Palm Sunday, but just looked around. He cleansed the temple on the next day, Monday.

John presents this story near the beginning of his Gospel. After calling his first disciples and going to the wedding at Cana in Galilee, Jesus heads straight for Jerusalem and cleanses the temple. This creates a tension from the beginning between the religious leaders and Jesus. They want to do him in and so they try all sorts of ways to entrap him. They knew that he was a threat to their whole way of life. He was dangerous and needed to be stopped.

What was Jesus upset about and why? Does Jesus oppose rummage and bake sales in church? No, I don't think so, although if all church members tithed their income, there would never be a need for a bake sale.

Would Jesus have a problem with Bingo night in church? I don't think so, but there are better things to do with our time.

Is Jesus against playing poker in church? Well, let's leave that one alone for a while.

Here is what Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan² say the cleansing was not. It was not against the practice of sacrifice. Sacrifice was common as a way to thank God and understand the sacredness of food. The cleansing was not against the priesthood. Rather, it was just against particular priests. There was a terrible ambiguity in that the high priest who represented the Jews before God on the Day of Atonement also represented them before Rome the rest of the year. The cleansing was not against Judaism or the temple. The building was ambiguous because it was both the house of God on earth and the institutional seat of submission to Rome.

According to Jeremiah, with whom Jesus was well acquainted, God insisted not just on justice and worship, but on justice over worship. If God's temple is used as a place where worship is substituted for justice, God will destroy the temple, since it has become a haven for

¹Psalm 19:14

²*The Last Week* by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan

perpetrators of injustice and a den for robbers.³ By Jesus' day, the temple in Jerusalem was a symbol of Roman domination and injustice against the peasants of Judah.

Jesus's symbolic actions proclaimed the already-present kingdom of God against both the already-present Roman imperial power and the already-present Jewish high-priestly collaboration with that power.

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is one of justice for all people. It is free of oppression. It is a system in which all people have value and worth because they are God's children.

The kingdom of God is made clear in the early days of the Hebrew faith. It is proclaimed by creation itself: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."⁴

God gave a system of laws that order human interactions with justice and decency. The Psalmist sings: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;"⁵

God has given us the law, Torah, the decrees, precepts, commandments and ordinances. God has given them not as a burden, but as a gift, as Kate Huey writes, "perfect, life-giving, wise, simple, right, clear, enlightening, and enduring. All these good things, and more, bringing us into a harmony with all the grandeur above and around us, from the immense but orderly courses of the sun and moon and stars to the infinitesimal and unfathomable minuteness of the atom and its inner workings. There is order in all this, and glory and goodness, the psalmist sings, and our own lives participate in that glory and goodness, especially when we find our place and rhythm within the order God provides. Rather than fear or guilt, we feel amazement at how all this unfolds in the grand and sweeping vision of the Creator God."⁶

When we remember that we are a small part of God's infinite universe, we will strive to be a creative and cooperative part of it. Just as the sun rises each morning, streaks across the sky and sets each evening, so, you shall not murder. Just as the magnolias blossom in the spring, so, you shall not covet or steal anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Which brings me back to playing poker. If poker involves taking advantage of another, and virtually stealing from your neighbor, Jesus might throw your card table over. If, on the other hand, a card game reflects kindness, fairness, good conversation, and hospitality, it might be being played around the table of our Lord!

As you journey through lent, consider God's handiwork, the sun, moon, stars, and babies; Consider your place in all of creation, and consider how your actions and words can reflect and proclaim the reign of God here on earth.

³Jeremiah 7

⁴Psalm 19:1

⁵Psalm 19:7-8

⁶"Beautiful Law" by Kate Huey in Weekly Seeds, i-ucc.org