

The Cleansing of the Temple  
February 17, 2013  
Luke 19:45-48

*Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers." Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.*

If you go to Google images and type in "Jesus cleansing the temple" you discover that this scene has been depicted by many artists. It is dramatic, chaotic, and some have interpreted it to be violent. Jesus' face is twisted with rage. His arm is raised above his head ready to come down with destructive force. In his hand is a whip. Tables are turning, animals are fleeing, money is flying, and fearful merchants are running for cover.

If we learned this passage as children it accompanied a lesson on anger. No one ever said this was Jesus' version of a temper tantrum but that is what was implied. Why he was angry always seemed to get lost in the lesson. For some reason it was just nice to know that Jesus got angry like us.

Yet when we set this story in its context a different story emerges. We learn that this story isn't a lesson on self-righteous anger. This story isn't about God's wrath and fury over bake sales and bazaars in the church. And this story in no way justifies the use of violence and force to bring about change. This act is a protest. Jesus is disturbing the peace, only it's not the peace he disturbs as much as complacency. Just before Jesus entered the temple he paused to look over the city of Jerusalem and he wept saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

Jesus is sad because this city, meant to be a beacon on a hill, a light for all people, is fogged in with corruption, greed, and indifference to the 99%...and continuing down this path will lead to its own destruction. So what are the things that make for peace? The gospel of Luke tells us this: "The bringing of peace begins with a call for repentance, for sharing coats, for making taxation just, and for ending military oppression. The coming of peace on earth means good news for the poor, a place at the table for outcasts, sight for the blind, and end to the subjugation of women, the responsible handling of wealth and property, and a reevaluation of what constitutes piety and holiness."<sup>1</sup>

These are still the things that make for peace. They are the plumb line of faithfulness. And that is why what happens next is so powerful. Jesus protests the corruption...he refuses to turn a blind eye...he refuses to remain silent. In an area that was three football fields by five football fields he turned over a few tables, set loose a few animals, and pointed out the wrongness of the whole situation. He makes his point well enough that from that point on the religious leaders start plotting and scheming on how to kill him. What was supposed to be place of prayer for gentiles had become a marketplace of price gouging profiteers. People who wanted to buy an

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<sup>1</sup> Interpreters Bible, Luke/John, p. 374.

animal for sacrifice, or exchange money for temple dues; people who wanted to be faithful were shut out because they couldn't afford to be faithful. Instead of a place where God is spilled out on the people, the temple had become a place where only the rich could afford to enter. God was held hostage behind a veil of corruption.

So Jesus protests and with that act he finds solidarity with all those who were shut out. His protest gives them hope. He begins to speak and for perhaps the first time in their lives these people who have cut off from God discover that God is for them, not against. God is with them, not bound in the temple. God sees them, unlike those who claim to be faithful but care only for themselves.

Protest takes courage. To protest is to subject one's self to ridicule, retaliation, incarceration, and in Jesus' case, crucifixion. Yet, where would we be without protest?

The Boston Tea Party was a protest.

The protestant reformation was a protest. In the words of Diana Butler Bass, "Luther and his associates were protesters rather than reformers—they stood up against the religious conventions of the day, arguing on behalf of those suffering under religious, social, and economic oppression. These religious protesters accused the church of their day of being too rich, too political, in thrall to kings and princes, having sold its soul to the powerful."<sup>2</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a protest against slavery. Having experienced the death of a child Stowe began to identify with slave women having their children ripped from their arms and sold off like animals. She gave institutional evil a face and a name and she exposed slavery for the horror it was.

Alice Paul, Lucy Burns and other suffragists protested in front of the White House the denial of rights to women as our nation entered WWI. They were thrown in prison, went on a hunger strike, and force-fed in what became a public relations nightmare for the president. Women's rights to own property, sign legal documents, leave an abusive spouse, gain an education were all fought for by protestors.

A couple weeks ago, the kids from Mainstreet Montessori performed a play for their parents in our sanctuary. Their 10 minute production told the story of the protestor, Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks was a trained organizer already active in the fight for desegregation and civil rights. Other black women had been arrested on buses, but Rosa Parks had the respect and support of her community. Black leaders strategically chose her arrest to launch the boycott. She wasn't just some tired seamstress. She was a protestor.

I was moved when the kids chose to conclude their program by singing, "We Shall Overcome." The last verse is, "We shall live in peace – SOMEDAY – Oh deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day."

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/dianabutlerbass/2011/10/putting-the-protest-back-in-protestant/>

Thank God there are still people who believe we are created to live in peace. Thank God, there are people still willing to expose evil and practice the ways of peace.

Fauja Singh is more than 101 years old and is considered the world's oldest runner. He is running marathons for the cause of women's rights. He is using whatever fame he has to speak to atrocities against women.

With the help of friends, a woman packed herself into a suitcase with one side made of plexiglass. She rode around the luggage belt of a major airport, where everyone could see her inside and the stickers protesting human trafficking on the outside.

Many protestors have found creativity and fifteen minutes of fame to be more effective than marches and parades. One group of protestors in Quebec City gently catapulted teddy bears over a fence to land at the feet of riot police as part of a protest against an anti-democratic trade policy. They exposed the potential harmful effects of the policy to people who were previously clueless.

How many of you remember Tank Man? He was also known as the "unknown rebel" and celebrated as one of the top one hundred most influential people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has never been formally identified and his whereabouts are unknown. Yet on June 5, 1989, for a few moments, he made us all pause. One day after the massacre of thousands of student protestors in China's Tiananmen Square, Tank Man, stood alone in the street, his arms outstretched to stop a line of 59 tanks moving by the square. It became an iconic picture of the little guy standing up to power. The tanks did stop rather than run him over in front of cameras and crowds. He was eventually pulled away, never to be heard from again.

The season of Lent is a season of repentance. It is a season to force ourselves to examine our lives, to ask ourselves if we have become complacent, and to recommit ourselves to the ways of peace. It is our time to ask, "What would Jesus protest?" What are we not seeing? What are we choosing not to see?

I confess I haven't been all that courageous. I haven't made a scene or protested out loud. Many of these issues seem so far away from good old Norwalk, Iowa, and we like it that way. Even so, we must take to heart Jesus' call for repentance and God's expectation that we know and walk in the ways that make peace. And the need for peace is all around us... from kids living with drug addicted parents, women and children being violated, bullies robbing children of their self-esteem, a broken mental health system, our tolerance of violence...

There's plenty to protest whether we do it with our voice, our vote, our creativity, our purchases, our pens, our legs, our arms, or our teddy bears. The alternative is to do nothing, pretend there are no consequences, and let Jesus weep.

Deep in my heart, I still believe, we shall live in peace some day...