

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

## **“Money-Changers in the Temple”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore April 9, 2017

### **Spoken Meditation**

Let us hold in our minds what Jesus saw as he approached Jerusalem during what is call Holy Week in the Christian tradition. King Herod had spent untold wealth reconstructing the Temple replicating its glory during the reign of King Solomon. It was a magnificent sight to behold for those who lived in rural areas and rarely saw walled cities. Such a display of opulence and wealth! Most would have responded with awe, which was the purpose of such monumental architecture. Imagine the great architecture you’ve known or known about in your life. The Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the pyramids, our own New York State Capital for that matter – all can move us with their beauty.

But Jesus did not respond that way. He wept. He knew first-hand the hardship and suffering of the people driven into poverty to pay for it all. Those tears reflect how many rural Americans feel as they look to the opulent cities on our coasts with extravagant displays of wealth. Bring to mind those you know who suffer unjustly from oppression and victimization, neglected as they fall through the social safety net that today has big holes in it.

Let us hold those emotions in tension with each other. Let neither erase the other. Feel how hard it is to be in both places of worshipful awe and bitter tears. Don’t try to decide which is right and which is wrong. Hold them together as best you can as we enter a time of silence.

### **Reading**

Matthew 21:10-17

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

And Jesus entered the Temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

And the blind and the lame came to him in the Temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the Temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

“‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?’”

And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

## Sermon

Jesus did what prophets have been doing since Moses made a covenant with God to protect and bless the Jewish people. When he entered the Temple's large outer court of the Gentiles, he witnessed a marketplace of buying and selling. Not that he hadn't seen it before. This would not have been the first time he had been to the Temple as it was the center of Jewish life and worship. Everyone knew you couldn't use profane Roman coins with images of deified emperors in the Temple to buy sacrifices. Everyone knew that your half shekel obligation to the Temple couldn't be paid with Roman money. No one liked the lousy exchange rates that were offered.

Even more objectionable was the scamming going on as part of the system of sacrificial offering. When someone came to offer a sacrifice, such as the one a mother was obligated to offer as a blessing for her newborn child, that individual had the option of bringing their own sacrifice. The law said that the sacrifice had to be *without blemish*. So Temple inspectors looked carefully at what people brought. To stimulate sales of sacrificial offerings, they would look really, really carefully to find something to disqualify the offering and force people to buy one at an inflated price. This whole system of sacrificial offering was well known at the time to be deeply corrupt and exploitative.

So like prophets before him confronting royal corruption and Temple exploitation, Jesus angrily disrupted it. In the Gospel of John, Jesus was described as using whips to drive the sacrificial animals out of the Temple. In Matthew, we just heard about tables being overturned and merchants being driven out. While doing it he proclaimed, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you make it a den of robbers."

I would like to draw some parallels this morning with what has just happened in Boston at our Unitarian Universalist Association's headquarters. At our yearly General Assemblies over the last twenty years, the delegates have made progressively stronger commitments directing our Association to be an anti-racist, anti-oppressive multicultural institution. Responding to the Black Lives Matter movement, we have doubled down on that commitment to deconstruct institutional racism and confront white privilege that is pervasive in America. Peter Morales, a person of color himself, cares deeply about this agenda.

That being said, the key leadership at the UUA is predominantly white—all skilled, talented, deeply dedicated people to be sure—but all white. When an opportunity arose to select a person of color for a significant leadership position as a regional lead and a white male was selected, the seeds for the current crisis were sowed. At a meeting of UU religious professionals of color gathered in Baltimore for their annual Finding Our Way Home retreat on March 17, Morales was questioned about the selection.

Without going into all the detail of who said what to whom and analyzing the controversy that ensued, suffice it to say, Morales' responses escalated the controversy and many people got very upset and angry. As he put it in an UU World article, he felt his reactions and responses had

undermined his credibility to resolve the crisis. He surprised almost everyone by deciding to resign a little over a week ago effective April 1<sup>st</sup>. Anger and criticism directed at him was a key factor in his decision.

Anger is a powerful, transformative force for change ... that is also potentially dangerous. Police officers who deal with large crowds know just how volatile and contagious anger is. A peaceful assembly can be quickly whipped up into a destructive mob by stimulating their anger. This was of immediate concern to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Jesus' prophetic action, whether he intended it or not, pumped up general discontent with practices that the chief priests and scribes were complicit in condoning and profiting from. Jesus was confronting their behavior in a way that made the priests very uncomfortable. People surrounded Jesus in the Temple and listened to his teaching. Jesus connected with people and earned their respect and admiration. He gained power with each day he taught – which meant he was undermining the Temple leadership's credibility. Jesus was dangerous to the status quo.

Morales too, was disturbed by the anger directed at him. This is not an uncommon experience of being in leadership in our Association. Many UU's are suspicious of our leaders in Boston and their potential to harm us as they try to influence and control us. This suspicion has made progress dismantling institutional racism that much harder in our movement. Congregational leaders and ministers don't want or like the UUA telling us what we need to do ... so we resist, reject and blame.

What many don't appreciate is the view from Boston. Often headquarters is way ahead of our congregations because they recognize patterns across our thousand plus congregations that are harmful, and self-destructive. UUA leaders pull out their hair watching our congregations shoot themselves in one foot, then shoot the other foot, then point the gun at their heads thinking they've finally figured out the ultimate solution to their problems. There is a lot of dysfunction in our congregations that the UUA is constantly struggling to address for their good and the good of the whole. And they don't always get much thanks for their hard work. And unlike Albany UU that contributes our fair share to support the UUA, many of our congregations aren't very generous in return for that help. This uncharitable climate can make our UUA leaders feel a little defensive.

And that defensiveness isn't just at the UUA. I can see it in myself for that matter. I am committed to dismantling institutional racism in our congregation. I know a number of people in our congregation who also share a similar commitment. Our Board is committed to this work. Then a situation arises, I strive to address it, and I miss assumptions of white privilege operating deep in my unconscious. And later, I wake up to see what I have done. In situations like this, I identify with what Morales just went through. It is really hard, in public, to do what you think is right, make mistakes, be responsive, be self-reflective and make corrections as a leader, again, in public, and not get defensive and self-protective.

Part of the problem is sorting out if you are confronting systems of privilege and oppression or protecting individuals and institutions from unwarranted attack. A good way to wrestle with this is by considering the question, "Who do you identify with as Jesus Cleanses the Temple?"

As a white male institutional leader, if I be honest, I tend to lean toward identification with the chief priests. They are dealing with a difficult situation after all. Jesus critique was agitating huge crowds of people there in Jerusalem for Passover—hundreds of thousands of people. If they had gotten riled up and rioted, the Romans would step in with horrifying violence. The Romans had built a huge tower next to the Temple so they could monitor activity in the courtyards directly. Any assembling of large groups of people might be signs of resistance to occupation. And when the soldiers saw that kind of activity, they came down on it like a hammer.

And the Temple practices had their legitimacy too. Not using Roman coinage was an act of resistance to occupation and the values of the occupiers. Right in the Ten Commandments is the prohibition against graven images. And for an offering to be legitimate, it needs to be a true sacrifice. If you drag in an old, decrepit animal that was about to die anyway, or a diseased bird not fit for consumption, what kind of sacrifice is that? They were upholding the faithful practice as they had received it from their ancestors making accommodations for people's needs by offering animals for sale. And there were already concessions for the poor. Offering a pigeon instead of a lamb was much, much cheaper.

Yet, I can also appreciate and identify with Jesus' perspective too. The corruption in the Temple worked to disadvantage the poor and separate them from the Jewish community. The Temple sacrifices and purity laws landed very hard on people who lost their land through oppressive Roman and Temple taxes. And a family without land was completely insecure. They only ate if they could work. These were the people who Jesus moved among and who deeply touched his heart.

So what happens? The Temple authorities turn Jesus over to the Romans. The Romans are anything but kind to troublemakers and make short work of him. They mock him as King of the Jews as they proceed to torture and kill him. While I praise Jesus for his complete commitment to the marginalized, to justice and to his mission, I do not see anything redemptive in the cruelty and violence he endured before he died. It was pure Roman terrorism.

Jews have been wrongly blamed for his death for thousands of years. The Romans should bear the responsibility. I think it is powerfully ironic that the church established in Jesus' name is the **Roman** Catholic Church. The Jews who turned him over to the Romans were the elite 1% defending the status quo. And eventually Rome completely demolished the Temple about 40 years later. It's a powerful lesson for those institutional leaders who might wish to collaborate with systems of oppression.

Three leaders of the Unitarian Universalist Association have now resigned: President Peter Morales, Chief Operating Officer Harlan Limpert, and Director of Regional Services Scott Tayler. I know all three of these men. I deeply respect their capacity to lead and listen. They are all good people who have been serving and sacrificing for Unitarian Universalism for years. And consciously or unconsciously, rightly or wrongly, they have been identified as collaborators with systems of oppression that have operated at headquarters for decades if not centuries.

The accusation we're grappling with today and we'll go into more deeply on May 7<sup>th</sup>, is the disease of white privilege and white supremacy culture which operates at our headquarters, in our leaders, ... and in our congregations ... and in each of us whether recognize it or not.

The temptation, and it is a very facile temptation to be sure, is to personalize it. The temptation is to identify one of these three men as the source of the problems. I want to emphasize how good hearted these three men are. Yet, it is so easy to get caught up in these systems of oppression, lose perspective and get our priorities wrong.

And our personal reactivity to anger doesn't help. Anger drives us out of our rational minds and into reactive, reptilian parts of our brain. These are essential parts of our brains that protect us from danger but are not the most fruitful place for white people to act and to speak from when trying to confront institutional racism. We all are struggling with parts of our brains that have *barely evolved* to make enough space for our hearts to break open and respond.

And yet, without that anger, often intensely expressed, without fierce resistance to the status quo, things just don't change. And the lone prophets seeking justice get crucified—a reason to work together in solidarity.

Let that be one of the lessons we take away this morning as we reflect on the ways we might be like the Temple leaders defending the status quo and how we might also be like the rebellious Jesus whose anger confronts injustice. If we seek to be agents of change and build a better world, we need to learn to recognize both these energies in our being. And when we do, it gets a little easier to wake up. Not less painful let me assure you, but if you've witnessed your complicity with racist systems once or twice, it raises your awareness the next time it happens. It doesn't make it any less painful to see it, but it does help deepen your commitment to the work of dismantling it.

And that is what is at stake. It is terribly easy, especially for whites, to discount the other and marginalize the voice we don't want to hear or the behavior that disrupts the status quo. Jesus cared so much about transcending the differences between people he was willing to put his life on the line. And know the people who have confronted the UUA's systemic racism past and present have also put themselves on the line and at risk.

I'm deeply grateful we have hearts as well as minds that can take the perspective of another person. We have the capability to work to dismantle oppressive and racist systems. What is critical is building our will to face the discomfort to do it for the good of all. May our hearts lead us in the paths of peace willing to endure the thorns we are sure to encounter along the way.

## **Benediction**

I close with these words by Yvonne Seon:

Each of us comes from a different place; yet all we are one.  
We carve for ourselves our own unique space; yet all we are one.  
We learn how to speak, eat, dress, cook, and play in different ways.  
Of common homeland, we have not a trace, yet all we are one.  
We kill, maim and harm one another with no thought for God's will.  
We forget the One God and one grace, yet all we are one.  
On a mountain in East Africa near Olduvia Gorge,  
    our common mother, "Eve,"  
Says that we come from one human race, and all we are one.