

TRUE ZEAL

A Sermon preached by Pilar Millhollen, March 4th, 2018

Readings: *Unveiling Empire* (Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther); John 2:13-22

Does anyone remember politician Mitt Romney's famous claim during his run for president in 2012? In response to a question about why he did not want to raise taxes on the rich, when an angry constituent demanded he raise taxes on corporations, Romney replied, "Corporations are people, my friend." This statement became a hotbed debate issue, creating fervor around a dubious and rather dangerous claim that such powerful economic entities were equivalent to the ordinary single person in a capitalist society. But the thing is, in this particular capitalist society, Romney is right and has been for over a century. In 1886, under an amendment originally intended to give previously enslaved persons equal protection under the law, the Supreme Court declared that the word 'person' includes corporations, companies, associations, firms, partnerships, societies, and joint stock companies, as well as individuals. I don't know if this is common knowledge, because it sure shocked me to learn that long before Citizens United, the U.S. government always favored and protected corporations despite the obvious potential for exploiting the middle and lower classes by tipping the scales of power to such entities. And only near to his death did Abraham Lincoln express the deep fear of what might become of such a society after this decision was made. "Corporations have been enthroned," he lamented, "an era of corruption in high places will follow and the money will endeavor to prolong its reign by working on the prejudices of the people...until wealth is aggregated in a few hands...and the Republic is destroyed."

Lincoln's words were prophetic. In the past 30+ years, our elected officials have exponentially propelled the rights and powers of the corporate entity to the highest level in the land, boosted by an underlying religious belief in the sanctity of the free market as a kind of savior of the people. David Korten, in his 1995 book *When Corporations Rule the World*, examined the swift and pervasive effects of economic globalism and deregulation on the ethos of American thought. From economic commentators to journalists to the academy, he identified a common thread running through free-market rhetoric. He notes, "free market ideology has been embraced around the world with the fervor of a fundamentalist religious faith...to question its doctrine has become virtual heresy." Lincoln was correct to fear the enthronement of corporations, for a transformation of vision and values had rapidly and voraciously taken place. The desire for upward mobility morphed into lavish excess, as unlimited growth became a creed of confession. And yet, fewer and fewer folks reaped the benefits of such expansion. Despite one of the "dogmas" of free-market ideology, which states that "economic globalization is beneficial to almost all," in reality the outcome has been beneficial to almost none. Between the effects of first world economies exploiting human beings for labor in second and third world countries and the ecological devastation from factory farming and cash-cropping, the majority of people aren't seeing much upward mobility at all, but rather they're seeing resources increasingly commodified and individual agency further and further restricted. In such a world economy, in a mode that claims to be the only path for human progress, we are left with a reality that boldly contradicts such a narrative and leaves the majority of humanity wondering why fulfillment has slipped through their fingers.

It is within this context that Jesus' act of civil disobedience in the temple at Jerusalem leaps out at us in a clear and cogent display of resistance. While this story appears in all four gospels, the one we heard this morning in John speaks with a different tone. John's gospel finds itself way past the time of Matthew and Luke, 30 to 40 years after the Jewish Roman war. Various Jesus communities have sprouted throughout Asia Minor hearing of this working-class Jewish Messiah who performed miracle healings and preached a radical coming realm of God where power structures were inverted and the vulnerable were raised up above the powerful. All four accounts set Jesus' act of dismantling the market economy within the temple against the upcoming destruction of the temple, but John, in a new era, reimagines this story as a metaphor for Jesus' resurrection. Herein lies an interesting point. This temple cleansing narrative in John is the longest out of the four gospels, and the only one in which the onlookers tie Jesus' action to prophetic messages in the Old Testament. Psalm 69 and Jeremiah speak of the social shunning its heroes faced in their zeal for God's ways, which ran counter to the ways of the dominant culture. Its speakers, David in the psalm and Jeremiah as prophet, lament their alienation from civil society in their attempts to prophesy against the increasing consumerism and materialism under imperial rule in which the Jewish people took part. While these empires were a part of ancient history for John, the Roman Empire under which John's community lived bore a striking resemblance to Babylon and Assyria, and held a particularly evil place considering the bloodshed and destruction of the Jewish Roman War. The end of the temple era necessitated a shift in focus upon the nature of God by changing the narrative around where God can be found. Before it was destroyed for the last time, the temple in Jerusalem was a cultural and economic center. Merchants sold animals for sacrifice according to Jewish law, which pilgrims could buy and offer in the temple. Foreigners could also exchange their currency for temple coins to pay a maintenance tax and make monetary offerings. But Rome benefitted from the monies exchanged in the temple: for although Jews maintained a fair amount of autonomy within empire, there was no tax-exempt status for the temple...the high priests were installed by Rome, and all monies passing through the temple had a cut taken out by the government. In this sense, Jesus' rage over the buying and selling going on in the temple square was directed not merely at the religious corruption of Jewish authorities and Jewish leaders, but rather at the greater problem of the corruption of Roman government and its pervasive influence on every culture that lived under its grasp. Conquest and consumerism were the primary modes of being under such a government, regardless of how autonomous individual communities tried to be, and corruption in leadership was inevitable under such a system, as morality became partially shaped by what the system valued. For John, Jesus' action of driving out the money-changers and the animal merchants was part 1 of a complex re-imagining of society as they knew it. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" the leaders demanded, for this kind of action could have resulted in imprisonment or execution for such public disobedience. By brazenly challenging them to tear down the temple with a claim he would raise it up in three days, he was making two points about the nature of God in this seeming paradox: 1) that a physical structure created for God to reside in is by nature contrary to buying and selling in a consumer society, and 2) that by reimagining the temple as his own body, the kingdom of God is found not in a certain place or by sacrificial acts and ritual, but within a way of life that revised the law so that mercy ultimately triumphs over judgment.

What is the alternative to conquest and consumerism, in a society where most religions have chosen to accommodate rather than resist? Perhaps it requires a kind of zeal that will say no to that which undermines the flourishing of individuals and the right of each person to live and live well, despite the dominant culture in which capitalism drives our primary value system. What Jesus was doing in the temple and what we might ask now, is at what point does consumerism become a fetish? At what point have we crossed the line from a necessary trade of goods for the enriching of human life, to a form of idolatry? When we sacrifice the well-being of humans by creating an unnatural and immoral economic divide between rich and poor we are subsequently destroying the authenticity of spiritual life as well. What we now romantically describe as Jesus “cleansing the temple” had the cultural equivalent of walking into the NY Stock Exchange and shutting it down. The thing is, just as it wasn’t exploitative to have a marketplace in the temple, neither do we view the stock market as evil by nature. But when global exchange primarily serves to concentrate the majority of wealth into fewer and fewer hands, we wind up exactly where we once started: with empire. And gradually, over time, the story that empire tells becomes the only path to salvation, and we accommodate our moral vision to suit the needs of empire.

This week, it has been hard to ignore the gross impact of free-market consumerism on our crippled democracy. I cannot help but think of how Jesus would respond to the very heartfelt narrative that the gun lobby continues to tell us – a belief that our salvation lies in arming ourselves with more weapons. That our future depends upon an embedded cultural tradition of our individual right to bear arms, and that this tradition is sacrosanct. This, by all means, has crossed that line from the enrichment of human life to a kind of misplaced zeal that can only be described as fetishism. Despite an abundance of evidence that decreasing weaponry decreases violence, the amount of money made from the manufacture and sale of guns – from handguns to military-style assault weapons – has shaped the narrative around this issue. Currently, about 35% of U.S. stock mutual funds include investments in a maker or retailer of guns and ammunition, at a \$17 billion spread across 2,000 funds. Only about 4% of guns manufactured here are sold outside the U.S., even though investors are both within and outside the U.S. Despite our individual belief systems around weaponry and war, which run the gamut, we are entrenched in a war economy, and within such an economy we cannot be surprised or confused by the inability of our leadership to change a narrative that is a part of who we have become. In this way, it is as shocking to the gun lobby to suggest that more laws will mitigate gun violence as it was for Jesus to suggest that the buying and selling of the temple economy was against the will of God. It took for the Jesus followers a remodeling of the moral foundation upon which Judaism was built, and it was not an easy, popular, or simple task. Like Jeremiah and David and all of Jesus’ disciples, the remodeling, the re-envisioning, the *resistance* to society’s less honorable yet more enticing norms was painful and alienating. It will take for us, in our free-market system, a similar restructuring of our economic norms to shift the views of the gun lobby – for once weapon and ammunition distribution becomes less profitable for a few very powerful companies, their gaze will turn to something else that is.

While this may sound a bit cold and utilitarian, the good news in all this is that the heart of the nation senses this crisis as a moral issue. Just as the Jesus followers listening to the good news of John’s gospel felt, the people of this country across multiple faiths and political ideologies, including gun owners, know that there is something very wrong in our cultural narrative that would make excuses for the sacrifice of our children’s lives. There is

an uprising of protest, a kind of protest that is asking us to re-examine our priorities as a nation, and part of the re-examination is forcing us to look at where the money is going. For the first time in at least 8 years, gun stocks have dropped as corporate giants have literally said, “we don’t want to be a part of this story.” A story where profit is more important than lives, where bloodshed is offered as sacrifice to a god that good people call “freedom,” but is at its core really a god of capitalism. We are at a crossroads, and just as John put Jesus’ act of civil disobedience at the end of his ministry, before he was sacrificed to empire only to rise in resistance, so we are rising against the unnecessary and immoral sacrifice of our bodies to a god of money. The road has been too long and too bloody, that finally even corporations are beginning to question the morality of the freedom narrative. It is not over yet and indeed it has just begun. We must hold fast to what is of God and be clear about what is not – even in the midst of empire claiming that it is the answer to our liberation. As people of faith, we must be clear about the difference between individual freedoms and the corporate profiting from violence. As our authors of *Unveiling Empire* have written in our first reading, we do not need to expect a total transformation of empire in its current state, we need to create a New Jerusalem amidst empire as an alternative to being totally swallowed up by it. We saw Jesus do it starting with the temple. And on and on through the ages, from followers across the globe who would not stand to be swallowed by empire. It takes the kind of zeal that disrupts the status quo; the kind of moral tenacity that refuses to bow down to what is not of God. So we call, we write, we vote, and - we divest. This is how we create the New Jerusalem, this is how we usher in the already-present realm of God in the midst of a world economy that is not consonant with this realm. This is our work, and as we move toward the season of Passover and Easter, may we never forget that this is the legacy that we are called to continue.