

# “An Incident in the Temple” by David Lloyd

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Image adapted from Hokusai (1760-1849)  
“Under the Wave off Kanagawa”

SEEKERS CHURCH  
A Christian Community  
in the Tradition of Church of the Saviour  
Lent 2018  
The Foolishness of Faith

## Third Sunday in Lent

I find this passage from John’s Gospel to be quite intriguing. It appears in all four gospels but in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke this incident occurs during the last week of his life, Holy Week, whereas John puts it at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as the first public action he takes after the wedding feast at Cana where he changed water into wine. By the time these gospels were written the Temple had long been destroyed. Early Christians might have smiled at the gospels’ account that Jesus said he would rebuild the Temple in three days. They knew he was referring to his resurrection.

Jesus’ rationale for his action in John’s gospel differs from that in the other gospels. In all four he complains that the Temple is no longer a house of prayer. But whereas in the other three gospels Jesus rages that the Temple has become a den for robbers, in John’s gospel Jesus complains that the

Temple has become a marketplace.

Today cathedrals and religious shrines around the world try to serve as houses of prayer while tourists (I include myself) walk around photographing the architecture, art and sculpture inside and then shop in the cathedral gift shop. Should we criticize them for having become marketplaces? Well, while I am so glad that the Time and Space mission group makes our beautiful building available to the community as a "ministry of place" I worry that because we use the donations from the groups using the building we run the risk of sliding into making our church into a marketplace. But I console myself that least we are not operating a currency exchange or selling animals...so far.

Why was money changed in the Temple? The simple answer is that during the Exodus God commanded Moses to tax the people to support the Tabernacle while the Israelites were in the Wilderness. When Solomon built the Temple this commandment was interpreted to apply to it. God's scriptures specified the amount; foreign coins were neither authorized in the scriptures nor was it appropriate, especially coins of the oppressive Greek and Roman pagan empires. Hence, the Temple needed money changers to obey God's commands. And in the same way we pay a premium to the bank, or cashier or ATM when we exchange currency in travel outside the U.S., Jews paid a premium to the money changers when they exchanged foreign coins for shekels. Note that in John's gospel Jesus doesn't accuse the money changers of cheating or gouging the people. He just opposed them for conducting commerce in a house of prayer.

Why were animals and birds sold in the Temple? In Genesis God created and ordered the cosmos in space, time, and all life and gave humanity rules to follow to maintain God's kingdom of heaven on earth. Throughout Genesis humankind violated those rules and God finally created a covenant with Abraham and his descendants to restore the kingdom of God. In Exodus God gave

them instructions – the Ten Commandments we heard today – to help it maintain God's order. These along with the rules for the Israelites' encampment that created the Tabernacle and the rules for the religious festivals created a small version of the kingdom of God. The book of Leviticus sets out rules for priests, religious rituals, agricultural and social practices, and dietary laws that regulate the kingdom of God. Leviticus prescribes animal and grain sacrifices – the rules take the first seven out of its 27 chapters – to (1) please God by the smell of the smoke, (2) celebrate life and give thanks and ensure future well-being, (3) purify the offeror from cultural and religious pollution, and (4) make reparations for having harmed others or having violated religious rules.

By Jesus' time the Temple in Jerusalem had a monopoly on all sacrifices. On December 31<sup>st</sup> our Luke scripture had informed us that after Jesus' circumcision his parents walked 6 miles – more than an hour – from Bethlehem to sacrifice two turtledoves or pigeons for her purification 40 days after childbirth, as specified in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus. If Mary and Joseph had been wealthier they should have brought a lamb and a turtledove or pigeon instead. So, you can imagine a steady stream of pilgrims coming into the Temple to make sacrifices in addition to the annual sacrifices for Passover, the Festival of First Fruits (the Day of Pentecost), and the Feast of Booths. In Moses' day the flocks of sheep and cattle were at hand for sacrifices, but now it was far easier for pilgrims from outside Jerusalem to buy the animal or bird at the Temple than to bring their own Hence the animal sellers.

We tend to see Jesus' driving out the animals and upsetting the money changers' tables as a form of social action, which is action to right society's wrongs, to replace wrong ideas, rules and procedures for a better future. At the January Stewards meeting a year ago we envisioned what Seekers might do in 2017 and one of the primary themes was social action. At several other 2017 meetings the Stewards picked up this

theme and refined it into six potential areas for our social action as a congregation: (1) peacemaking, (2) addressing homelessness and maintaining the safety net for low income people, (3) immigration related issues, (4) confronting racism and supporting racial diversity and LGBTQ+ people, (5) care for the environment, and (6) support for women & children. Tonight the Stewards will be working on these areas of social action again to identify ways to involve the larger Seekers Community. What social action are you willing to take as part of a group? The Stewards want to hear what you think and what you are interested in doing, and especially what you will commit to doing, what you are willing to be held accountable for doing.

We have a range of social action steps we can take. Peaceful protest marches such as the Women's March the day after the Inauguration and demonstrations against ICE's arrests and deportations raise public awareness for or against proposed or actual governmental action. Writing to elected officials on behalf of or against legislation and policy, such as the letters to officials concerning Medicare and public housing, demand action. We can financially support nonprofit organizations, such as New Story Leadership's efforts to reorient young people in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza to a new story of peacemaking.

As we consider more formal social action I suggest we come up with answers to hard questions. First, what is the goal of our action, what is the wrong we seek to right? Is our goal consistent with our deepest values, consistent with our faith, consistent with God's plan for the kingdom of heaven? Second, and perhaps more critically, are the methods we choose to achieve the goal consistent with our deepest values, consistent with our faith, consistent with God's plan for the kingdom of heaven? Another way of asking this is whether the ends justify the means. Third, what negative effects may result from our actions, especially consequences that aren't

immediately evident?

The hard truth is that we always act, even with the best of motives, without full knowledge, so humility is in order. We may not be in the right. Those we oppose may share our goals but subordinate them to different goals that are based on their deeply held values. Or they may disagree with the tactics we have chosen. Our actions may prove to be harmful.

Was Jesus' driving the animal sellers and moneychangers out of the Temple a form of social action? Did he merely want a quieter, more orderly way for the process of animal sacrifices? Or was he totally opposed to the whole system of sacrifices, killing other creatures for our benefit? Did he merely want a different way to financially support the Temple? Or was he totally opposed to the Temple? The Bible doesn't say.

We frequently say that Jesus was "cleansing the Temple" or "purifying the Temple." But rather than being social action, correcting a wrong, Jesus' action may have just reflected a theological disagreement over the Temple's purpose. In his book *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, the late Marcus Borg points out that the reason for the sale of animals and the exchange of money was to maintain the distinction between the holy and profane, including the distinction between holy nations (Judea) and profane nations (Rome). But Jesus was preaching compassion for all life, including Gentiles, as holy to God. He foresaw, correctly, that the continued emphasis on resistance to Rome based on a quest for holiness would bring destruction to the Temple and to the people.

As a child I learned "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" but his lashing the whip at the animals and overturning the tables of the moneychangers was a premeditated act of violence. As the disciples watched him braid cords a whip what did they think he was going to do? Were they shocked? Did they agree? Did

they suggest nonviolent action? Did he refuse or ignore them? We don't know.

Can we empathize with the Temple's priests and Levites, the pious coming to make sacrifices, the animal sellers and the moneychangers? They thought the sale of animals and birds and the exchange of money were necessary for God's laws to be followed. They were helping the pilgrims; they might have viewed their work as their call, as a holy practice.

Those who disagree with us, those who oppose us, those who we are sure are wrong, who are doing harm, are first and foremost our brothers and sisters. They may do things we think are evil but they themselves are not evil, they too are children of God. They might even be proved right at some later time. We are called to love them, not pronounce judgment on them. This is difficult to do; I fail at this at least as frequently as any of you.

Jesus was unsuccessful in his social action. The next day things resumed as if he'd never appeared. Temple sacrifices continued for another 40 years until the Romans destroyed the Temple. We are so impatient; we should remember that social change occurs in God's time, not according to our timetable.

Why do Christians engage in social action? To right society's wrongs, to replace wrong ideas, rules and procedures for a better future. And all the while, our hope is in Christ, who uses us to restore the kingdom of God, to bring about God's shalom for all humanity, for all life, for the universe. In an essay "Sacrifice and the Temple," included in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Dr. Naphtali Meshel of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem notes that both Paul's letters and the gospels speak of Jesus' death as a form of the ultimate sacrifice that ended the need for any sacrifices. In some New Testament passages Jesus' death is likened to God not sparing his son just as Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, in some as the Lamb of God similar to the Pascal lamb sacrificed

at Passover, in some as an offering for sin killed outside the walls of Jerusalem similar to the scapegoat bearing the sins of the Hebrew community on the Day of Atonement killed outside the community, and in some as a sacrifice of reparation, like the sheep led to slaughter in the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah.

Dr. Meshel notes that some New Testament passages allude to Jesus' death as the sacrifice of well-being in which the sacrifice was always eaten communally by the guests. We are about to do just that as we partake of communion. We eat the bread, saying that it is Christ's body. We drink the grape juice, saying that it is Christ's blood. And like many Temple sacrifices of Jesus' day, where the offering and the communal eating of the sacrifice was pleasing to God, our communal sharing of bread and cup is pleasing to God, in this house of prayer that welcomes all, that strives for peacemaking.