

## JESUS CLEANSSES THE TEMPLE AND THE SYSTEM



When Jesus tells us that the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself he gives us room for individualism, free will and creativity; we are free of the constrictions of a severely prescribed method of behaving that fails to allow us to be *fully* human.

These commandments echoed advice I received decades ago: “you can do what is legal or you can do what is right.” Obeying the law is legal, legal justice. Biblical justice is legal justice *and* compassion, mercy, morality and ethics. Biblical justice is an expansive view of our obligations that is best understood through the parable of the Good Samaritan where we are to ponder “who is our neighbor?”

In today’s first reading God gives us the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17). These commandments leave us very little room for interpretation: “You shall not have other gods besides me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them.”

Many of us follow these commandments merely as the law instructs us—to obey the law and adhering to the letter of the law. For us, the Ten Commandments prescribe a restrictive code of behavior.

The Beatitudes exemplify the *spirit* of the law. Jesus’ sermon demands that we act not only as the Ten Commandments instruct us but also beyond what is written. Love knows no boundaries. Justice has no limits. Under God’s law we are called to work for a world of boundless love and pervasive, compassionate justice. Biblical justice.

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus cleanses the temple from money changers and sellers of oxen, sheep and doves. We do not condemn his outrage because they made his “Father’s house a marketplace” (John 2:16). His anger seems justifiable, especially since he was obviously furious with the money changers who, because of their unscrupulous practices, took advantage of the poor and vulnerable. You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15).

From listening to the story of Jesus cleansing the temple I have a mental image of the scene. There is a more complete picture, however, that we cannot visualize from the reading alone. I picture animal sellers and moneychangers located in the actual temple instead of the temple courtyard, where they did in fact ply their trade. The animals weren’t sold for food but to provide a sacrifice to God, necessary for worship. Those who were obligated to purchase a sacrificial animal (those who, because they had a long journey to the temple, needed a fresh sacrifice) were exploited by the vendors and paid an exorbitant price.

I don’t picture Jews who came to worship and needed to exchange their Roman currency into Jewish money to pay the temple tax. My mental picture includes the moneychangers but it doesn’t draw attention to their practice of exploiting the pilgrims and charging an exorbitant exchange rate.

I don’t picture moneychangers and the animal vendors in the temple courtyard with the approval of the temple authorities who made a profit from the exchange of money and the sale of sacrificial animals to the pilgrims to fulfill their religious obligations.

I can picture Jesus directing his wrath at the money changers and sellers of oxen, sheep and doves but I don’t also picture Jesus angry at the authorities who profited from this unjust economic enterprise. In Jesus’ time the temple cultivated an economic system that was unfair and exploitive and he cleansed the temple in protest against the players, the authorities and the system that perpetuated this injustice.

For all we know this economic system may have been legal and perhaps there was nothing in the Ten Commandments that expressly forbid this structure. Jesus, however, instructed us to act beyond what is written, to follow the spirit of the law where justice has no boundaries. Biblical justice. Economic justice.

(Readings for Third Sunday of Lent)



Office of Life, Justice, and Peace