

Ordinary 3

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Salem United Methodist Church

We've been talking about everything... Ordinary this year for Lent. We've looked into dust, bread, the cross. Now, we look at coins. If you've been following along in our Lent devotion, Lent in Plain Sight, you just finished a powerful week of readings about the Cross. Yesterday's reading was incredibly powerful for me, so check it out if you missed it. It's not too late to join the study. It is available on Amazon. If you want to jump into the themes without reading the book, there is a reading schedule with guide questions posted on the last page of the newest newsletter. It's designed to be printed out. There is also a fancy version on the website that is best on the computer since it is so colorful. We're also posting the discussion questions in our weekly email and our Facebook. So, there are many ways to jump into the conversation at your own level. Team Sparkle was painting the other day and wanted to talk about the cross readings, so I popped over while they were painting and we talked while they worked. These objects are so ordinary to us that it's easy to jump into the discussion.

So, today is all about coins. Coins are more than just money. It's also about security. If you are doing the readings this week, you'll see 7 different stories of coins in the Bible. Today, we'll focus on one to get us started. Let us pray for understanding.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found... people... selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changer seated at their tables. Without making a big scene, Jesus, with all the zeal within him, walked directly to the middle of the room and began to speak. "Take these out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" He then sat decidedly in the middle of the space, determined not to move until they changed their ways.

Wait a second...

Oh! Oh gosh. Excuse me. That's not it.

That's not the scripture reading! That's the Gospel of John in the Emily's Wishful Thinking Translation! Excuse me. Let me find the right one...

Okay, here we go.

*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changer seated at their tables. Jesus, full of zeal, made a whip of cords for himself and each of his disciples. They systematically drove everyone out, even the sheep and cattle. They overturned the money changer's tables while shouting "take these out of here! Stop making God's house a marketplace! You people are evil! You have done wrong! You need to **learn** and **change your ways!**"*

Oh. Oh no! I did it again. That's not our Bible. That's the Gospel of John, Modern Violent Edition.

Forgive me. Its just, we hear so many different interpretations from our friends, our families, the news, even in church! Sometimes its hard to hang onto the real scriptures.

And even then! Its so easy to twist them to mean different things. Its easy to **use scripture** to justify our own thoughts and feelings, rather than listening for what God is working to change within each of us.

sigh let's try this again.

The Gospel of John, chapter 2, verses 13-22.

Hear, now, the Word of the Lord in the New Revised Standard Version.

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords [wait, is that right? No, that's right. Okay.], he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle [oh my. How dramatic.]. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables [phew! I bet they weren't happy about that!]. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Well.

I guess... I guess that's probably not a text that we lead with when we're talking about salvation, right? Most of us really like to think of Jesus as a friendly guy holding small animals and children. We like to think of a Jesus who never gets riled and simply returns with questions that causes people to think. Deep Socratic method. Nothing physical. Nothing **truly** disruptive. We will have a transformation of the mind, [not of our actions.]

Its, uh, uncomfortable to see Jesus like this. Full of zeal that leads him to make a whip and chase out a whole shopping center. If that happened today? It would be on the news and he'd be in jail or a mental institution, right? You can't just chase people around with whips, no matter what your message is. Yes, it was different times. But I highly doubt **anyone** was okay with being chased with a whip and having their store destroyed.

We look at this story today, and if we've heard it before, we already know that Jesus is the good guy, the superhero, and the sellers are the bad guys. They're the people who take advantage of poor people. If it were a movie, we'd "boo, hiss" when they came on screen.

But that's only because we know the story. To the shopkeepers? To the people going to the temple? They're **not** the bad guys. They're just doing their jobs! They're making a living. They have families, friends, religious leanings, and obligations. They're as human as you and me.

They may have been *surprised* when Jesus swooped in. they may have seen themselves as providing a valuable service. At that time, people would make

specific kinds of animal sacrifice for different kinds of needs. If they needed to make an offering with birds but didn't actually have any, here you go! Perfect. A chance to get what they needed to make their sacrifice to be close to God. A one-stop-shop! Wonderfully **convenient!**

The problems come when people start charging more than people can afford. Suddenly an offering isn't just from the heart, its from their security. Suddenly it's the choice between a relationship with God and feeding their families.

Oh *God*, that's not what we want!

To me, that's scary. It's scary to wonder how that's happening now. Not if that's happening now, **HOW** it's happening now. The world is human. We fail. We ask people to choose their security over God all the time. Perhaps not with money, specifically, but we certainly do it.

It's scary to wonder what the church is asking of people. Its scary to wonder if turning our lives over to God through a church will save us or hurt us.

[transition to now]

When I was a kid, I had a beautiful necklace with one pearl on it that my grandparents gave me. I wanted to wear it all the time, but my mom was rightfully cautious about it. I thought I should most definitely be wearing it to church. If you can't wear your pearls to church, where can you wear them!

My mom adamantly refused to let me. She said that if the pastor's family was wearing pearls then people who didn't have any might be uncomfortable and stop coming to church.

Sometimes we have secret barriers to church built into our norms.

Sometimes we build barriers to someone's inclusion in church that we don't even see.

I have a friend who grew up in a church that one day did a complete remodel. She said she looked at the opulence of the re-done building and said she could never trust that church to do missions again. She realized that her idea of how to use money for God's glory didn't align with her church's ideas.

Ouch. Can you imagine? It must have been really painful to realize that!

Churches, like the temple, are a human system. We're doing our best, but we, too, are prone to making church based on **coins**, rather than love of God.

And... that's where Jesus-the-superhero comes in! He swoops into the Good Church Crowd with a whip and a group of disciples. He shocks everyone by turning every.single.person. and animal out. He shocks them with his anger, with his proclamation that God will build an even more glorious temple in just 3 days.

And, I bet he shocks them because they believe they are the Good Guys. Now, that's [their beliefs about themselves], that's not in the text. That's in Rev. Emily's

interpretive brain. But they believed they needed these systems or they wouldn't have existed. At the least, a **necessary** evil.

We have those, right? We have systems we don't love but don't know how to function without. I'm sure everyone has at least one in their mind. And I bet you're all thinking of different systems! What would Superhero Jesus say about it? [go ahead and take a note for our Zoom talk-back if you want!]

Now, it's a little awkward for me to be preaching this text as someone who just went through an 8-year process to qualify through a system to become an ordained pastor. There is more process to go, just not on my end. Its long and convoluted. I mean, right there. The United Methodist Church. That's my system that I don't fully love but don't know how to do in any better way.

It's not perfect. I'm not convinced that the United Methodist Church is perfectly following God on all counts. I'm positive that Jesus could run through here with his whip and I'd be amazed at what we're doing as a collective church and an individual church that brings on his "zeal." *I'm sure* I'd be angry, frustrated, and confused. *I'm sure* that Jesus would pick out things that I feel I have no control over. *I'm sure* I'd wonder what else I could possibly do.

Some days, scriptures like this are enough to make me wonder why I bother with institutionalized religion anyway. Have you ever wondered if you'd be better off with just a Bible, a journal, and a friend? Just learning through meditation and doing your best. No buildings, no corruption, no church politics, or policies.

Just you and Jesus.

[pause]

Being in meaningful relationships with other humans will always be hard. With your family, best friends, spouse? We all get wrapped up in things and sometimes we hurt each other. Institutions like the UMC come together to try to make it harder to hurt each other and easier to help. Because we come together in service and finances, we can support the United Methodist Committee on Relief. That's an entire non-profit dedicated to disaster response. If you check the online bulletin, you'll see we'll be joining people all over the country in collecting supplies for Texas. Because our system is based on a desire to collaborate for the Kingdom, we can do some awesome work. We support them that way, tangibly, and its part of what our Mission Share money supports. When we give our Mission Shares, formerly called Apportionments, to the conference, there's a portion that goes directly to UMCOR. And, to do more, we'll be doing an UMCOR Sunday on March 14th, next week. We'll highlight some missions and give you opportunities to help out. It wouldn't exist without our UMC system!

And yet, our major decision-making body that meets every 4 years, General Conference, has been spending more time debating human sexuality than in doing mission. There are people within and outside of our church that are waiting for the end of that debate. Waiting to see where we fall as a denomination. And yet, we can't even have the debate because of COVID. Our 2020 conference was just

postponed to 2022. Now we will have more time living in our system-limbo. What a very human system.

How do we balance our human-ness within the system and our desire to make a big splash of God's grace in the world?

I choose to be a United Methodist pastor because our definition of grace is so lovely and expansive. I also choose to be United Methodist because I love our connections. I love having clergy and churches to coordinate with. I love that our ordination process is slow and methodical and that we work to protect people who are vulnerable.

And yet, I'm sure Jesus could chase us with his whip. So, I choose to be part of the change. I choose to speak up. I choose to listen when I'm confronted with my own sins. Some days are better than others.

Here's what I think is important though: we can't pretend that everything is fine. We can't rewrite the scriptures so that we feel better. We can't rewrite the scriptures so that we can beat other people up with it. We have to take it as it is. We have to see ourselves as we are.

The truth is that we're just ordinary people. We're not the superhero running in to change the world. We're the bystanders who get to figure out to do once our eyes have been opened. And in our broken world there won't be any perfect systems. Just drops of grace where we see the Kingdom of God shine.

Let's listen to the scripture one more time. This time, in The Message version. Ask God to open your eyes, your mind, and your heart.

13-14 When the Passover Feast, celebrated each spring by the Jews, was about to take place, Jesus traveled up to Jerusalem. He found the Temple teeming with people selling cattle and sheep and doves. The loan sharks were also there in full strength.

15-17 Jesus put together a whip out of strips of leather and chased them out of the Temple, stampeding the sheep and cattle, upending the tables of the loan sharks, spilling coins left and right. He told the dove merchants, "Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a shopping mall!" That's when his disciples remembered the Scripture, "Zeal for your house consumes me."

18-19 But the Jews were upset. They asked, "What credentials can you present to justify this?" Jesus answered, "Tear down this Temple and in three days I'll put it back together."

20-22 They were indignant: "It took forty-six years to build this Temple, and you're going to rebuild it in three days?" But Jesus was talking about his body as the Temple. Later, after he was raised from the dead, his

disciples remembered he had said this. They then put two and two together and believed both what was written in Scripture and what Jesus had said.

I am grateful God sent Jesus into our ordinary world to disrupt our broken systems. Be careful which necessary-evil systems you support. We can't divest from all systems in our world. But we always have choices about how we engage. You are never stuck. If you think you are, talk to me. I probably don't know the answer, but we can find it together.

We can't fix everything overnight. But Jesus can do a lot in 3-days.