

Lenten Sermon

Luke 19:45-46

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It was 1997—it was a long time ago. I was in my second year of theological preparation for ordained ministry. I felt inadequate, wholly unprepared, and completely out of my depth.

We met at an on-campus restaurant, you know the type—food and ambience greatly lacking, but a high convenience factor. I had been chosen from among my fellow students to share a meal with a towering theologian, one who had made an impact on generations of scholars and practitioners. He was kind, he was cordial, he was courtly, and much to my chagrin, he was curious. He was genuinely curious about a twenty-two-year-old seminarian from his vaunted perch of intellectual accomplishment.

He asked me what I was reading. I was flummoxed; I had prepared and memorized questions for him, but I never got to ask one of them. He was the one asking the questions.

He sensed my reticence. He asked me whose books I was reading, what was I reading. I said, “I am reading Howard Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*.” I became more comfortable and more talkative. I told him, “I love Thurman’s question about what Jesus offers to a people who live with their backs against the wall?”

He looked at me kindly, but with great concern. He said, “I knew Dr. Thurman,” and I was like, wow! He said, “I admired him deeply – as a man.” And then I knew some shoe was about to drop. I felt the atmosphere shifting in that bad campus restaurant. He said, “But you shouldn’t spend much time reading Mr. Thurman. He is not orthodox. People argue about Thurman’s Christology. Most say he had a low Christology; but I say he had no Christology at all. You should read someone else. A promising young seminarian like you should read a real theologian.” I was shattered. He was the authority; I was not. He was a teacher, a renowned scholar; I was a student. I was deeply affected. A man whom I admired greatly had said to me that I should not admire another man whom I admired greatly. With one swift rhetorical kick, my interpretive table came crashing to the ground.

I am learning something, and I believe that many of you are learning this as well. I am learning that the practice of ministry, service in the church of God, service among and with the people of God, preaching and teaching—these things are far from static enterprises. As a matter of fact, stasis is the opposite of ministry. The Spirit is constantly blowing you, and constantly blowing me, into interpretation and reinterpretation. The Spirit incessantly moves me toward deeper examination of myself (and that can be painful), deeper examination of my tradition. That is painful, deeper examination of our context, deeper examination of our world. The Spirit unceasingly nudges me to see what I refuse to see and to acknowledge that which I would rather deny.

As I reflect upon what happened when I was 22 years old, and as I consider now that I am 46 years old with nearly 22 years of pastoral experience, I am now asking different questions. Who has the authority to interpret text and world? Who has the authority to tell me or you what books to read? Who has the authority to judge our theologies and praxes? I would not handle the event that occurred when I was 22 the same way at 46. I gave that towering theologian authority then that I would never give him today. I let him stop me from being free enough to read and to interpret for myself. I let him stop me from being free enough to allow the Spirit to blow me into theologians he thought unworthy.

I believe that God's Spirit is calling us to a new interpretation—calling me to a new interpretation—of what it means to be generous: generosity beyond our culture's penchant for atomization and individualization, generosity beyond merciful responses to deep human pain that only justice can address, generosity beyond being sentimentally moved by the dehumanization of our siblings and the destruction of the planet that sustains us. Hear me, generosity beyond sweetness, generosity beyond niceness, and generosity beyond kindness.

To that end, I want to assert a different interpretation, a Spirit-driven hermeneutical leap, if you will. What Jesus did in the temple on that day may have been one of the most generous acts of his entire ministry. This is a confrontational generosity. This is dangerous generosity. This is the kind of generosity that is attended by ongoing teaching and formation. This is the kind of generosity that God's people deeply crave—and I say this without diminishing the works that we are all doing in our communities.

Allow me to read again,

Then he entered the temple

and began to drive out those who were selling things there.

He said, "It is written, my house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it into a den of robbers."

Every day he was teaching in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

(Luke 19:45-46)

Herod's Temple was a marvel. It sat gloriously atop the Temple Mount, an area of 35 acres. All but priests were forbidden from entering the temple itself. Only men, Jewish men, could enter the courtyard closest to the Temple. Men and women together could occupy the next court, and the court farthest from the inner sanctum was where the Gentiles gathered.

Faithful Jews came to the Temple from all over the world to offer sacrifices during the Passover. Now, traveling with animals to sacrifice on these long, arduous journeys would have been unwise and impractical, and so, they must have been good

Americans because a market sprang up to meet the needs of the people. We are clear that Roman currency, with its imperial imagery and propaganda, could not be used for exchange in the temple, and so, there was a currency exchange, the exchanging of Roman currency for temple currency without imagery, without imperial propaganda.

Now this trading itself was not an evil; it was necessary. The people needed to purchase animals to sacrifice. The people needed to exchange Roman currency for temple currency. The problem arose when religious entrepreneurs found a way to charge exorbitant rates of interest on exchanging the currency. The offerings of the poor, pigeons and doves, were marked up beyond reason. And the people who wanted to worship God could not worship God without being exploited. The worship of God—in the text, and unfortunately in the worship of God in too many places in our contemporary moment—is tied to exploitation of the vulnerable. Jesus enters Jerusalem in this account. Jesus enters the cities where United Churches of Christ are in ministry in Wisconsin, and the text tells us that Jesus weeps. He sees how in our day the worship of God is entangled in exploitation and extraction, and Jesus heads straight for the temple.

Luke's gospel is a gospel of pneumatological confrontation. According to my teacher, the great Ron Allen, the scholar of Luke and Acts and homiletician, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into confrontation in this gospel.

In Luke 4, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where he is confronted by the devil. The evil without him and the voices within him are trying to stop him from leaning into the Spirit's vision for his life. This same Spirit drives him, I believe, drives him to the temple—and I want to assert that the same Spirit is trying to drive us. Allen taught us that that word was literally the same word that people used when they described what they were doing to their oxen to get them to plow in the fields. It is to be driven, to be forced in a direction you might otherwise not go. I believe that I'm not the only one who feels the Spirit driving me in a direction that I would prefer not to travel. When Jesus is driven into the temple, he then drives out of the temple those who had taken what was necessary—the market of selling animals for sacrificing. It was a necessary thing, but they made it into a tool of oppression.

Our world is filled with necessary things that have become tools of oppression. The poor must eat, yet food, healthy food, is more expensive in their neighborhoods than in the neighborhoods of the affluent. People need housing, and we're on the front line of this work in Washington D.C., yet the poor pay more of their income, more of a percentage of what they earn, to house themselves than many of us do. People desire to worship God, yet many churches continue to baptize the worst excesses of capitalism—and domestic and global imperial overreach.

What does generosity look like here? It looks like interruption; it looks like disruption. Jesus disrupts the commerce, the exploitation, as a sign to them and a sign to us. God knows, God sees, and God is calling for something different. This is confrontational generosity. What would confrontational generosity look like in my

ministry? What would confrontational generosity look like in your ministry? This is not only confrontational generosity. Beloved, this is a dangerous generosity. Corporations grow richer from the world as it is. We have seen how the wealthy among us and corporations made more money during the pandemic than during “normal times.” We see how many churches also have grown wealthier and more powerful in these days. Luke is clear. We cannot read this text any other way.

This kind of generosity, this kind of generosity that interrupts and disrupts systems of oppression, causes religious and secular leaders to crank up the machinery of death. The text says that after Jesus did what he did in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the leaders looked for ways to kill him. We must again ask the question that Bonhoeffer posed to us: “Are we willing to pay a price, a cost, to be disciples?” They are looking for a way to kill him, no sentimentality here, the machinery of death. And I admit to you, and maybe you must admit to yourself, we must admit to one another, that I have a deep and abiding fear that the cost of following Jesus will be our own cross. The cost of following Jesus will be our own deaths. The cost of following Jesus will be the end of our careers.

We must ask ourselves if this fear of death and death’s machinery is stronger than our desire to follow Jesus. We fear for our careers. We fear for our churches. We fear the loss of comfort. How can we move beyond our fear? Let’s be clear that Jesus staged this moment for maximum impact, but he also understood the threat that it would be to those who held power. This is a generosity willing to pay the price of discipleship. I am clear that I have tried and failed discipleship. I am clear that I have tried and failed discipleship. I have tried again, and sometimes I have succeeded.

I know what it means to be excluded in the career moves of ministry because of things that I have said, decisions that I have made, but I hold fast to the story told so eloquently by Father Richard Rohr. What good is it to spend your ministry climbing the ladder, when you look down and realize forty years later the ladder was leaning against the wrong building? And many of us know that the successful trappings of ministry—large church, large salary, large influence – are often the clothing of death arrayed in the gift of a strong church.

Jesus’ generosity led to crucifixion. How many will continue to be crucified if we refuse to be generous in this way? This kind of generosity is confrontational. This kind of generosity is dangerous. This kind of generosity also destabilizes and requires ongoing teaching.

I am reading *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* by Kathryn Tanner, and I recommend it to you all to help you to understand—she is helping me to understand—the textures of how the kind of financialized capitalization under capitalism in which we find ourselves is very, very dangerous. One of the things that she mentions in that book is that people are always asking, “If we need a new system, what will it be? Shall we be socialists? Shall we be like the Scandinavian countries? What must we do?” And she says when people get into the level of

granularity, what they are really doing is admitting their fear and lack of imagination toward being and doing differently.

I do not want us as followers of Jesus to become paralyzed about clearly defining every next step. The spirit will blow us if we are willing to go. The question for us is one that Tanner raises in her essay, "Are we faithful enough to think the break?" I want to say that one more time: are we faithful enough to think a break from the world as it is constructed?

The world in which we live is something that we have imagined, and together we can also imagine something new. When our imaginations are fossilized, ossified, calcified such that we cannot think of a break from what is, we must question our devotion to the ministry of this Jesus who was blown by the Spirit. I am concerned with encouraging you and encouraging me to think about new possibilities, and the text says that even after Jesus had done what he had done in the temple, every day he kept showing up teaching because it was not enough for him to perform that amazing sign of driving out the exploiters. He had to come back and teach the people what the break would mean, because not only have the wealthy and powerful grown more wealthy and more powerful because of the way the world is ordered, but those who are exploited have become used to such an order. They have habituated themselves. We have habituated ourselves to such oppression. He showed up day after day teaching the people, encouraging them to engage their imaginations and to unite their bodies with the movement of the Spirit that something new might dawn in time and in space.

This is the kind of generosity that confronts. This is the kind of generosity that is dangerous. This is the kind of generosity that requires ongoing teaching. But possibly, most blessedly and most encouraging, it is the fact that the text says that the people were spellbound by this kind of generosity. The powerful were trying to eliminate Jesus, to kill him, but they could not kill him because he had the support of the people, and their lives also depended upon that same support. They would not kill him then for fear of how that would affect them.

What I want to posit now is that if we are engaging, as churches and people of faith in generosity that confronts, in generosity that is dangerous, in generosity that continues to teach and to think and live the break, the people will join us. The people are waiting for the church to exhibit the generosity that our Lord exhibits. The people are waiting for us to show the signs, to live in the discomfort, to pay the price. Our greatest evangelization will be following Jesus in this kind of confrontational, dangerous, ongoing teaching generosity. The people will follow. The people are waiting. The text says they were spellbound by what they saw. They knew they were witnessing one who was filled with God's power. And when we, though haltingly, move in the direction of this kind of generosity, our communities will stand up and say, "We have been waiting for this kind of display of generosity."

In this day, we must rethink generosity. I firmly believe the Spirit is moving us here. I don't believe I am the only one feeling the prompting of God's Spirit. I will

no longer let others interpret for me. Wall Street does not get to interpret generosity for me. The Democratic and Republican parties do not get to interpret generosity for me. The United States of America does not get to interpret generosity for me. My own denomination does not get to interpret generosity for me. I will no longer let others interpret for me when I know that God's Spirit is blowing and pushing. I am no longer that person who at 22 could allow some well-known theologian to interpret for me and change my trajectory, because I understand that faithful ministry depends upon my following the blowing of the Spirit into places of confrontation and danger and teaching and gathering together with God's people who await our faithful display.

And so I have returned to reading Howard Washington Thurman, and his question is still relevant. What does Jesus have to say? What does the church have to say to those with their backs against the wall? Will we be generous enough to follow Jesus? Will we be generous enough to confront? To risk danger? To keep teaching and imagining the break? Will we be generous enough to join all God's people in these wonderful signs of the inbreaking of God's realm among us?

My friends, they are waiting for us.