

Occupy Religion  
A sermon preached at  
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church  
(Disciples of Christ)  
Fort Collins, Colorado  
November 13, 2011

We may think of Jesus' cleansing of the temple as a movement to restore the temple as a place of prayer. But every day people were going in and out of the temple to pray. Jesus was restoring the temple as a place for the kind of prayer and the kind of religious practice that remind a community of God's call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Texts: Psalm 123 & Matthew 25:14-30

Bernard Harcourt is chair of the political science department and professor of law at The University of Chicago. In a recent editorial,<sup>1</sup> Harcourt wrote about the Occupy Wall Street movement. He says that, for the most part, those who are participating in the movement are resisting the "powers that be." Not just the banks. Not just the government. Harcourt suggests that it's something more, something deeper. At the heart of the protests, he says, is a complaint about the way we've come to do community in America:

- partisan politics;
- policies that favor those in power at the expense of the marginalized;
- rules and regulations that favor the wealthy at the expense of the poor; and
- our practice of demonizing the "other", whether the other is Republican or Democrat, the rich, the poor, the racial/ethnic, the immigrant, the Tea Party member or the Occupy protester.

Folks have seen through the charade of elected leaders on both sides of the aisle. They talk about creating more opportunities for those in the middle and at the bottom of the economic ladder, but they're engaged in a convenient political stalemate in which the rich continue to get richer and the poor continue to get poorer. Whether it's proponents of a so-called free market and less government or advocates of more regulation and bigger government, the strategies of both are serving the few at the expense of the many. The system is broken. You can argue with Harcourt's assessment, but it's hard to argue with the alarming gap between the rich and the poor, a failing economy, an education system that's falling behind in the world, a crumbling infrastructure and other signs of a culture in crisis.

I didn't intend to draw us into a conversation about the Occupy movement. But after I read the texts assigned for today – Psalm 123 and Jesus' Parable of Talents – I couldn't help but think of this movement which has encampments all across the country,

including here in Fort Collins. You read the Old Testament prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah: the time was long ago and the circumstances varied, but their complaint was the same. The community is broken, out of balance. The question that the prophets were raising on God’s behalf is the same question that growing numbers in our culture – on both the right and the left – are asking. “In what kind of a society do we want to live?”

Psalms 123 is a prayer that would have been prayed by the community, most likely during a time of sustained adversity. This is one of the gifts of the Book of Psalms. There’s a prayer for every occasion, every emotion, every challenge that the community of faith or an individual believer might experience. You need a prayer to help you express your thoughts to God – the community needs a prayer to express itself – there are 150 to choose from.

But I’m wondering if Psalm 123 expresses the experience of our church community and the American Church in general. And if not, then how are we to pray this prayer? This is a prayer of complaint, a call for help. Those who pray it are likening themselves, not to the master or the mistress of the house – to those in charge – but to the servants who look to their masters for their sustenance. “Have mercy on us, O LORD, for we have had more than enough of contempt.” I understand that there are several among us who are experiencing a time of deep personal challenge, for whom this prayer of lament is quite appropriate, this cry for help. But this is a prayer written for the community. It starts out in the first-person – kind of an “I’m personally committing myself to this prayer” – but it quickly turns to the plural. The language of complaint is “we” and “us”, which makes the praying of this psalm problematic for a church which, for the most part, is as well off as ours. I don’t know. This is what I want to explore with you this morning.

Here’s a blunt way to put it. Do we really think of ourselves as suffering the scorn of the rich and the proud, or are we closer to the community of the carefree and arrogant from whom others in the world are seeking God’s deliverance? It makes a difference in how we receive and pray this prayer – as a complaint to God, or as a confession.

I can hear some thinking, “Wow, I didn’t come to worship to hear about money and politics. I came to hear about the Spirit.” But if everything is spiritual, if creation itself is an expression of God’s will and grace and provision, then the way we do community, our politics, and a broken economy, and the growing divide between the rich and the poor, and the state of our institutions, and the integrity of our leadership are matters of the Spirit. They’re of concern to God. Which makes them our concern too.

When Jesus used the word *talent* in this parable, he wasn’t talking about the skills and natural abilities with which each of us has been blessed. He was talking about money. An enormous sum of money. A talent was equal to fifteen years of wages for a day-laborer. Jesus was talking about what we do with our money, how we handle our wealth, which according to Jesus – according to the parable – comes to us

as a gift, a trust. The man in the parable, Jesus says, he *entrusted* his property to the three: one with five talents; another with two; another with one. When the man returned from his journey, his servants returned the trust, two having made something of the gifts entrusted to them, the third having hidden it away in anxiety and fear. But all three returned the trust to their master, because it belonged to him. He had given it to the three to manage for his sake while he was away on his journey.

When the man speaks to the two who have made something more of what they'd been given, you recall what he said. He said, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things..." Then this, which I think may be the more important reward. The man says to his servants, "...enter into the joy of your master." What do you think this "joy of the master" is all about? Those of us who've heard the story a hundred times are inclined to think that Jesus is talking about heaven. But the man in the parable is talking about "the here and now" – a joy to be experienced, the same kind of joy the master has experienced, here, now, in this life. I think this joy – a kind of freeing, joyful abandon – comes in the act of entrusting our gifts, investing ourselves in others, like the man in the parable. It's the joy that comes not in withholding or hoarding or finding reasons why the others aren't deserving, but in risking ourselves and what we have for the sake of the community.

At the heart of Jesus' teachings – from his Sermon on the Mount and many of his parables, to his feeding of the hungry and his healing of the sick – is a confrontation with the way his people were doing community, the ways the world has come to do community. Jesus came to address the injustices and inequities in his day, and to call us to address the places of brokenness in ours. When I saw footage of the Occupy Wall Street folk entering the lobby of Bank America in New York, I thought of Jesus entering the temple in Jerusalem. Overturning the tables of the moneychangers, driving them out. He was addressing the powers that be and exposing the brokenness of Israel's governance and economy, and the religious leaders who had conspired to support the broken system for the sake of their own wealth and power. I think of Jesus' cleansing of the temple as a movement to Occupy Religion, a confrontation with the institutions and the practices of our faith whenever our religious practices – even our worship – become a substitute for creating a just community. We may think of Jesus' cleansing of the temple as a movement to restore the temple as a place of prayer. But every day people were going in and out of the temple to pray. Jesus was restoring the temple as a place for the kind of prayer and the kind of religious practice that remind a community of God's call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Jesus points to another way to do life. Here, Jesus says. Here's life. Grace. Forgiveness. Second chances. The Holy Spirit. The love of God. The mountains, the water, the sun and the stars. Friends, family. A love of music to some, a passion for art or athletic ability to others. A way with numbers or words. A gift for teaching or fixing things, even making money. The suffering of others. The needs of many. The whole beautiful and broken mess of the world. Here, I entrust to you a portion. Make

something of it, risk it for my sake and yours. It's a gift. A trust. Enjoy it. Don't bury it. Put it into circulation. Don't play it safe. There is no safe.

You can read this parable about life in the kingdom and make of it a parable about judgment in the End. There's judgment here. Outer darkness. Weeping, gnashing of teeth. But I know folks – you do, too – who for the sake of their petty or fearful view of God, or their anxious refusal to embrace their share of life, they're living right now in a kind of outer darkness. Their cheeks are tear-streaked. In anxiety and fear, they've ground their teeth down near to nothing. Surely we don't have to wait until the end to learn that living a fearful, trivial life is a kind of hell.

Then there are persons in these other communities, who in their poverty and isolation are also living in a kind of hell: those whose eyes, like the eyes of servants looking to the hand of their master, look to the LORD for mercy; those who've had more than enough of contempt, their souls having had their fill of the indifference and scorn of those who are at ease.

Maybe this a clue to how you and I might pray this prayer with integrity, Psalm 123. Maybe, in our remembering them, in our coming up alongside these fellow servants, the poor, the marginalized, the left behind, the scorned... maybe if we risk praying this prayer beside them – which will be to risk the scorn of others – our own prayers will turn from confession to grateful joy.

Listen. It won't matter in the end whether we've doubled God's gift to us or whether we've blown it all. What will matter is our knowing whose currency we're using and whose servant we are – a Master of great compassion who challenges the status quo, forgives sinners, heals the sick, throws parties for prodigals, reaches out to the untouchables, dies for the stingy, rises again to bring the dead to life, and gives out talents one, two and five at a time as if he has an unlimited supply. What will matter is our having shared in the joy of the Master by risking ourselves to create a community that sees to the wholeness of all.

— Jeff Wright  
sernb11

<sup>1</sup> The New York Times (on-line, 10/13/11)

Sunday evening, a member of the congregation forwarded this picture along with this note, "How WEIRD that I saw this tonight after your sermon today??!"



