

St. Andrew's UMC  
March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
John 2:13-22  
"In the Temple He Found People Selling"

This past week, the Mexican government lodged a formal protest against Forbes' magazine for including in its listing of world's billionaires the name of a drug kingpin who heads one of the most violent drug cartels in the country. The magazine pegged Joaquin Guzman at #701, with an estimated fortune of \$1B, between a Swiss oil trading tycoon and an American chemical heir. Mexico protested that the magazine praised criminals and treated the head of the drug cartel as a legitimate businessman.

It appears that Mexico's plight was underappreciated by the editors or whoever was responsible for bestowing such an honor upon the most wanted kingpin of the drug cartel, for 5,630 people had been killed in 2008 alone in drug-related violence. The Americans buy more than \$28B's worth of drugs per year, and supply 90% of all guns used in the killings.

We might be surprised by the ferocity of the violence

accompanying the drug trade, but such violence is not really an unusual thing in the human culture. The human history is fraught with violence, whenever a dispute arose between two antagonists, in regards to their conflicting interests.

Would you be surprised, if I told you that even religious people resorted to the same violence, in order to eliminate the perceived enemy? Such a violent approach to solve one's problem was not limited to the drug dealers or armed groups. Violence is in the heart of the human race. Even the Gospel of Mark testifies to the same violence that the religious leaders chose:

<sup>17</sup> And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."<sup>18</sup> And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching. (Mk. 2:17, 18).

Mark lays the blame of murderous conspiracy right at the feet of the chief priests and the

scribes. The only thing that held them back from laying their hands on Jesus was their fear of the crowd who seemed to be impressed by Jesus' teaching at the moment. You are looking at a classic politicians' behavior in the religious leaders'. One might observe that nothing much changed in the human nature over 2000 years, whether it was religious people or the drug cartels that plotted the violence.

**L**uke was not so subtle either, in his assessment of the main cause of Jesus' demise:

<sup>45</sup> And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, <sup>46</sup> saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers." <sup>47</sup> And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him; <sup>48</sup> but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people hung upon his words (Lk. 19:45-48).

Something bothered these people to a great degree, and they wanted to kill Jesus for it. All he did was driving out the animal sellers and money exchangers

from the temple. Could it really be the reason why the temple management—the high priests and scribes—and the principal men of Jerusalem wanted to kill him? What could have threatened them enough to conspire to kill Jesus?

**E**very year, the faithful were required to come to Jerusalem and worship their God, and the ritual of sacrificing animals was central to the worship in the Hebrew religion. Those who travel a long distance over the land and sea could not bring the unblemished, live animals with them. And they had to exchange their currency, for they came from various parts of the Mediterranean world. And that was a potentially monopolistic opportunity for those who wanted to take advantage of the situation.

Since only the unblemished animals that passed the scrutiny of the priests might be sacrificed, the travelers had to rely on the local supply of such certified animals. Since the priests were

the only ones who could certify animals fit for the sacrifice, if such certified animals were conveniently found within the four walls of the temple compound, you have a near monopoly of supplying the sacrificial animals.

If someone had the connection with the temple management, he could have won a lucrative contract, supplying the pilgrims with the rare commodity. You could put a price that is many times the going rate outside the temple—just like the defense contracts that we know about.

Since the proprietor of the animal business needed to use the space within the compound, it would be only fair to pay a reasonable rent to the management. Since the businessman would hire employees to handle the retail sales of the exorbitantly-priced animals, the businessman can reap the handsome profit from the monopoly, even after paying the temple the rent and his employees the wages. The same would work for other businesses

set up within the temple compound, such as money exchangers. And there was the never-ending line of customers.

**T**hings were sweet for everyone: for the temple management, for the merchants, and for their employees. They created jobs, contributed to the local economy, and strengthened the temple treasury, increased the tax revenue for the Caesar, lined the pockets of the religious leaders, and ripped off the faithful. Then Jesus happened.

Jesus singlehandedly destroyed in one afternoon the lucrative businesses that had been going so well, even under the military occupation of the Gentile Romans. Now we can surmise why the temple authority and the principal men of Jerusalem wanted to have Jesus killed. That is the exactly the same motive that drives the drug cartels to kill: the greed.

Jesus should have known better. He should not have messed with those who control money and

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power. Yet he did. And that aspect of challenging those who are in power and those who collude with power is inherent to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Jesus had to challenge the powerful, because they are the ones who pretended to guard the sanctity of the temple, but turned it into a money-making machine, all in the name of God.

It was not unfair for Jesus to accuse the temple authority and the principal men of Jerusalem of turning the House of Prayer into the den of robbers. The gospel of Jesus Christ does not ignore or tolerate corruption and profiteering in the high places.

**O**ne might question, what difference does the gospel of Jesus Christ make from others who also clamor for justice and transparency? The distinguishing difference is that the gospel does not seek to gain political power or pork, but it seeks to reform the political dialogues and its processes.

In that respect, the gospel of Jesus Christ follows the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testaments: they challenged the kings and the high priests whenever they perverted justice, corrupted righteousness, and uttered lies in God's name.

**N**owadays, that crucial aspect—the prophetic tradition of the gospel—has been weakened greatly, because the churches now line up to receive the handouts from the government. Programs such as “faith-based” assistance that the government gives to the charitable causes help the churches minister to others on one hand, but also stifles its prophetic voice on the other hand. It is rather awkward to bite the hand that feed you.

Another factor that handicaps the strength of the church is its inescapable dependency on the stock investment for its financial health. The strength of the church's ministry rises and falls with the ups and downs of the stock market. In other words, the ministry of Jesus Christ is

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abdicated to the whims of the stock market. But these are nothing compared to the aspect that dominates the church's viability: the financial support from the membership.

While some churches have no problem raising enough funds to sustain its mission and ministries, other churches cannot afford the full time pastors, and they barely manage to pay the heating and electric bills, especially the small, rural churches. The last thing they would want is a pastor with the activist flair that creates controversy and drives the members away and splits the church.

Actually, we have seen it already many times in the past, even within our own denomination. Churches split and members departed over inclusion of Blacks in the congregation, over ordination of women as pastors, over support of the farm workers union, and recently, over solidarity with gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual persons. Are these issues worth risking

schism, or nothing is worth risking the reduction in the attendance, apportionment, or offering?

**T**here is a way to make the church's mission and ministry independent from outside influence, however. It is a strictly the biblical solution, and it is called, *tithing*. The mission and ministry of the church are supported and financed by its own members, and no outsider may dictate the church how to behave or what to say, or how to serve God.

If selling stuff and exchanging money in the temple was offensive to Jesus, what about the similar activities taking place in the modern church? How will the modern church' financing behavior stand up to the standard of Jesus Christ? We do fundraisers, sell thing in the church, and invest in the stocks and bonds. We take in the donations for using our facility. We even hold annual rummage sale.

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What the modern day church faces is not so different from what the temple of Jesus' time faced. It is the financial, social, and political issues that challenge the integrity of the Christian fellowship, as it did the ancient religious society. The faithful will have to make the decision as to whom to include in, and what to reject from, their fellowship of Jesus Christ. The church will have to prepare itself for the repercussions to its theological integrity and its faithful responses to the gospel. No good deed goes unpunished.

There are churches that avoid any controversy altogether, if it is suspected to affect the Sunday attendance and the offerings. Those are the feel-good, everyone-is-okay churches. What compromises does each church choose to make, in order to continue, or justify, its existence? Is it the financial health, or is it the gospel witness? Is it the budget, or is it the mission? Is it the stability, or is it the transformation? Whatever the choice, it will shape the faith and

the spirit of the particular faith community.

I have been building up the Pastor's Hawaiian Vacation Fund at every church I was appointed. I started the fund by putting a quarter in it. Palo Alto church is no exception: it still has a quarter in it. Obviously, the members of the churches I served did not see that such a fund was a good idea. How does that stand the scrutiny of Jesus Christ, as far as the danger of turning the house of prayer into the den of robbers is concerned?

But we did establish the Scholarship Fund, and are planning to build up that fund through various means and fundraisers. We also do the annual rummage sale. We also sell goods from Central America for mission.

I did the calculation for the rummage sale, conservatively, and it turned out that, given the number of hours members worked, and the amount of proceeds we netted, it comes to

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about \$9.26 per hour. I estimated that members worked total of 270 hours, and raised about \$2,500, not including the donation of the goods, food, and drinks. We are talking about a very labor-intensive operation that earned a moderate income. The workers, from children to octogenarians, all gave the precious labor to make things happen. I tell you, there are not many churches where 8 year-olds and octogenarians work together.

**T**he question is, what causes can we support with this money earned with such precious labor? First thing that comes to my mind is, of course, why not give the entire amount to the Pastor's Hawaiian Vacation Fund? Then again, some would question the wisdom of indulging a pastor that way. Maybe our electric bills, instead? Perhaps a new carpet on the altar area?

Maybe there are better causes than meeting our selfish needs. How about giving to the Scholarship Fund? To other

mission purposes? We are limited only by our own visions.

As long as we intend our fundraisers for the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, and away from meeting our selfish needs, it is acceptable in Jesus' eyes. For our other needs, we can support the causes from our joyful giving. If we do not collect sufficient funds for those other causes, then it is alright, because, not every selfish cause needs to be met for the children of God. They can do without one or two.

We will do well, if we reserve what our precious labor earned for the most worthy causes of the kingdom of God. That will be the unblemished sacrifice, pure and holy, and acceptable in God's sight. It is not just the dollars that is offered, but also our physical and mental labor that is holy and precious in God's eyes.

May God bless you, as you give freely what you have set apart for God's service. May the Spirit

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inspire your giving. And may  
your joy be made full, as you  
dedicate your labor and the fruit  
of your labor to God's work.