



Conventional Wisdom Turned Upside Down

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

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(The preacher is deeply indebted to professors Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan for much of the language and thinking borrowed from their informative and newest book, *The First Paul*.)

In the fourth book of the New Testament, Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple early in his public ministry. According to the second book of the New Testament, Mark's gospel, Jesus overturned the tables on the Monday of the last week of his life. There is no agreement about when Jesus did overturn the moneychangers' tables. There is, however, universal agreement that he did do it. In fact, according to the radical Paul Jesus lived his entire life overturning tables – the tables of conventional wisdom. For Paul “Christ crucified” was the “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” We've just heard Paul say, “For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor. 1: 25)

Here we have profound alignment between today's readings. Here in this pulpit at All Saints Church we try to preach and practice the religion of Jesus more than the religion about Jesus. We don't spend a lot of energy parsing the doctrines that always wind up dividing so-called Christians from so-called disadvantaged people who don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. That was never the religion Jesus practiced anyway.

Our focus here, is this 1st century Jewish Palestinian peasant of peace and justice and inclusion who saw the kingdom of God alive and well in people both within his religious group as well as people outside his religious group, who saw the Kingdom of God alive and well in people who belonged to his race and those that didn't – belonged to his class and those who didn't; belonged to his gender and those who didn't; belonged to his gender and who didn't; and for all we know belonged to his sexual orientation and didn't. And certainly he saw the Kingdom of God alive and well in those people who observed his own spiritual practices as well as those who didn't. Our focus is this gentle nonviolent albeit sometimes angry man who said to all structures of power which would divide, dominate, and disparage any creature of God, “The source of your life is not empire and domination and exclusion; the source of your life is God.” With his very life Jesus said to the outcast, the poor, the disadvantaged, “You are beloved. You are loved by God because of your being, just by breathing. You are not loved by God because of what you do or fail to do.”

That is why Jesus overturned the tables in the temple and lived a life saying that the wisdom of God is not the wisdom of the dominating structures of organized religion particularly when institutionalized religion gets in bed with or in cahoots with the empire. The temple was the symbol of that in Jesus' time for temple religion was a religion that said that you could not be aligned with God unless you went to the temple once a year physically and bought a sacrificial animal and had that animal slaughtered on the altar of the temple by the priests there. The amount of money you paid to buy that animal and the other temple taxes you paid which, of course, had to be changed into temple money from your own secular money – all of that money you paid went in large percentage to the Roman Empire which was then occupying Jesus's nation. And institutionalized religion was supporting that kind of graft.

Jesus turned over the tables of the temple that day – an act which led to his imprisonment, torture and death on Good Friday. It was indeed a political act. At its depth, however, it was a spiritual, theological deed. It said that God’s wisdom is foolish to the conventional wisdom of the world. People do not have to make bloody sacrifices to be realigned with God. They already are aligned with God. But what they have to do is this deep interior work of accepting their acceptance – of reversing their amnesia of their alignment with God – of believing their belovedness.

The temple embodied not this kind of spiritual embrace from God, but rather it embodied Rome which, in turn “embodied the wisdom of this world – the normalcy of this world, the way life most commonly is, the way things are.” (Borg and Crossan, *The First Paul*, p. 135)

And, Jesus believed, that when you and I access this thing inside us Jesus called “faith” or “the Kingdom of God” or what Dr. King called “The Beloved Community” or what others call “The Interconnected Whole” that is both within and outside us,” then we can be made well, joyful, peaceful, empowered to change ourselves and our entire world where it is not in alignment with God’s wisdom.

In an outstanding Trinity Institute lecture on the disastrous course of continuing to live according to conventional wisdom, priest and professor, Timothy Gorringer from England spoke of the foolishness of the wisdom of the world – the foolishness of the wisdom of domination societies. He said, “Jared Diamond’s book *Collapse* is a commentary on this truth. Diamond considers a number of societies, both ancient and modern, where social and ecological rules were willfully overlooked. Those ancient societies are now under the sand. Diamond warns us that this will be true of Montana and London in the near future if we do not look out. [God’s wisdom] is not religious mumbo jumbo, as secular rationalists imagine, but fundamental reflection on justice and survival, on what makes human flourishing possible. [God’s Wisdom] is not the letter which kills but the Spirit which makes for life, the spirit, the effervescence of the divine imagination within us.” (Timothy Gorringer, “Living Towards a Vision: Cities, the Common Good and the Christian Imagination,” 39th Trinity Institute National Theological Conference, Radical Abundance: A Theology of Sustainability, January 21-23, 2009)

Then Gorringer really got my attention when he wrote the following: “We all know that we are exceeding the earth’s carrying capacity, living in bio-deficit. For everyone in the world to live like a Londoner we would need three planets.” Then he gets close to home. “If everyone in the world today were to live like a citizen of Los Angeles, we would need five planets; like a citizen of Dubai, ten planets. We have unsustainable buildings like the Sears tower in Chicago which uses more energy in 24 hours than an average American city of 150,000 people, or an Indian city of more than 1 million people. We have a situation where New York City uses as much electrical energy as the entire continent of Africa. We know that the richest cities contribute most to worldwide environmental degradation because of their dependency on an unsustainable level of resource use.” (Timothy Gorringer, “Living Towards a Vision: Cities, the Common Good and the Christian Imagination,” 39th Trinity Institute National Theological Conference, Radical Abundance: A Theology of Sustainability, January 21-23, 2009)

One of my favorite opinion-editorial writers is Frank Rich of the New York Times. Last Sunday Frank Rich wrote one of the most homiletical op-ed pieces I have ever read. “We’re still working our way through the aftershocks of the orgy of irresponsibility and greed that brought America to this nadir. In his recent letter to shareholders, a chastened Warren Buffett likened our financial institutions’ recklessness to venereal disease. Even the innocent were infected because “it’s not just whom you sleep with” but also “whom they” — unnamed huge financial institutions — “are sleeping with,” he wrote...” Rich then noted the “public soul searching of another national sage, Elie Wiesel,” survivor of the Holocaust, writer of moving accounts, devout Jew. “Wiesel joined the Portfolio magazine panel discussion on Bernie Madoff. Some \$37 million of Wiesel’s charitable foundation and personal wealth vanished in Madoff’s Ponzi scheme. “We gave

him everything,” Wiesel told the audience. “We thought he was God.” (FRANK RICH, “Some Things Don’t Change in Grover’s Corners,” The New York Times, March 8, 2009)

We all have thought that not only Bernie Madoff and anyone else who made huge profits were gods, but the religion of the unregulated stock market has been part of the prevailing theology and wisdom of the world.

But our call, your call, my call this morning is to engage in the deepest spiritual work there is. To be able to join Jesus, St. Paul and the band REM and be able to say, *“It’s the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.”*

Jesus and Paul saw that any domination system has to be sustained by violence and exclusion and thus any domination system is morally bankrupt along with any so-called theological or religious wisdom that legitimates that domination system. And, too frequently, we Christians know that the religion *about* Jesus not *of* Jesus has been hijacked to legitimate the domination system. But Jesus and Paul died to that world of domination systems. They were crucified to that world long before Jesus was ever tortured and killed by that wisdom and later Paul martyred by that world’s wisdom.

Paul ends the paragraph that we read today by saying, “God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, Jesus became for us wisdom from God.” (1 Cor. 1: 30) The most important thing we can know is that the God who loves us is the source of our life. And the internal wisdom of God is the source of our counter-cultural wisdom – God living and speaking within us. We are called to access that voice. We are called to reverse our forgetfulness that we are a walking witness of belovedness from God to one another and for all people and for the entire cosmos. The arc of the universe is long but it bends not only toward justice as Dr. King said, it also bends toward inclusion, economic justice for all, sustainability for the planet and will eventually bring to dust all structures and theologies that stand in opposition to the inclusive compassionate wisdom of God.

Every wise piece I read about the current global economic collapse says that we will never return to the economic picture of 2005. We are headed to a new economic destination and all of us must be a part of sculpting it. Jesus during his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness went through a radical internal change. Paul on the road to Damascus went through a radical internal change. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan in their new book on St. Paul describe Paul going through a “Spirit transplant.” That is for you and me to overturn the tables inside our own hearts and thinking so that “the effervescence of the divine imagination” can come alive in us, can turn the human race into the human family and recognize that this precious, fragile planet is the very body of God and it is up to us to care for it.

When Jesus bid his disciples come to the table, the word he used was “Remember.” “Do this in remembrance of me.” I love the Greek word (translated remembrance) the word is actually anamnesis – literally to reverse one’s amnesia.

So my friends, my brothers and sisters, my fellow stewards of the earth and of the future, come now to this table to have your amnesia reversed about the fact that your true self is the embodiment of the loving God living and effervescing within you in service of the entire human community.

Amen.