

MARCH 15, 2009

LENT 3

“COMMODYING TRUST?”

Let us pray, using the closing words of today’s psalmody: “*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*” Amen.

“In God We Trust: All Others Must Pay Cash.” Remember that old sign we used to see on the wall behind the cash register or sometimes on a bumper sticker? We’d smile and then go on with business as usual.

But business as usual isn’t going on any longer is it? Or is it? Writing just a couple of days before Christmas in his Sightings newsletter, the prominent Lutheran historian and commentator Martin Marty remarked how he’s been working on yet another book, this one to be entitled Building Cultures of Trust and confesses to how he had been worrying in starting the book how he’d have

to spend many pages discussing why “trust” and “broken trust” were relevant themes. This, of course, was before the Madoff scandal in which, as Marty says, “one network of trusters, many of them relying on connections and handshakes” — and not incidentally, I’ll add, on their common Jewish heritage and connections — “suffered a criminal breakdown of trust.” Other commentators like Paul Krugmann, the Nobel prize winning economist and NY Times columnist, has drawn the, at least to me, obvious conclusion that the Madoff scandal in its outright criminality is really only a kind of outrageous parable of what much of our American — and indeed global — financial industry has been up to these last years in this period of government deregulation, with, need I mention, the collusion of too many of us ordinary Americans who were looking to make a fast buck on what many suspected deep down to be phony economic premises — a “house of

cards,” as a new expose of the whole scandal calls it—or to invoke Bernie Madoff once again, a truly systemic Ponzi scheme.

Today’s story from John’s Gospel of Jesus’ “overturning” of the money-changers’ tables in the temple precincts might strike you as more of a “**pretext**” for today’s sermon title, “Commodifying Trust,” than an actual text—but I find it addressing our current economic **context** in a remarkably relevant way that suggests, as Martin Marty put it, “if ever there was front-page or prime-time moral and ethical discussion about a theme which has theological dimensions this is it”—this matter of public trust about which Marty says the media are incessantly shrieking. His conclusion is that, “**trust** is not only relevant; it is **desperately crucial**.”

So let’s look at today’s Gospel story. Interestingly, it’s one of the few stories about Jesus that we find in all four Gospels, more than a hint that this was a tradition about Jesus that those early Christians thought needed to

be preserved. Last week, remember how we were surprised by Jesus' unceremonious and harsh rebuke of Peter, calling him Satan, cussing out his lead disciple, the future pope, telling him, in effect, "to go to hell." We're unaccustomed to hearing these kinds of edgy words coming from our "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," aren't we?

But today we encounter Jesus undertaking what we might strike us as some uncharacteristically forceful, bordering on violent, action, as he overturns the tables of the money-changers in the temple precincts, and, St. John adds, even goes so far as to make a whip of cords, as "driving" them all out of the temple—the Greek word literally means "threw them out"—all of them, sheep and cattle and doves but money-changers and money as well I expect. "*Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!*" Jesus thunders like Yahweh from the top of Mt. Sinai as in today's OT reading.

The Greek word translated as “market place” is “*emporium*” as in our English word “emporium,” — a place of business or trade in which “commodities” are bought and sold. You’ve turned, Jesus says, my father’s house — “*oikos*” — that root word I’m forever reminding you that lies at the root of our words “economy,” and “ecology” and “ecumenicity” — you’ve turned my father’s “*oikos*” — meaning of course “the temple” — into a shop, a trading place, or to use a good old Persian word that Tanni and Arash and Bamdad would be familiar with, now common in English, a “bazaar” — a word, of course, sometimes used of church bake sales and Christmas craft boutiques and so on.

Now scholars are quick to tell us that there was a good, reasonable basis for having the booths of money-changers and animal vendors in the temple courtyard. In fact, they were a kind of convenience for Jewish religious pilgrims who came to Jerusalem to visit the temple from all over Israel and the larger

Mediterranean world—something like the Hadj, one of the pillars of Islam, where every faithful Muslim is at least once supposed to make the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. But of course the Holy City in Jesus’ day was under the boot of the Romans, and as Jesus himself once pointed out in response to a questioner trying to entrap him, Roman coinage not only carried the image of the emperor but the claim that the emperor was divine—a blatant offense against the first commandment. And so Roman coinage need to be exchanged for Jewish coinage in order to be used within the temple precincts—both to purchase sacrificial animals and to be given as offerings—as in the story of the widow’s mite. So it was “handy,” we might say, for pilgrims to be able to exchange their money and buy their sacrifices right outside the temple doors. Think of them as religious “convenience stores”—ancient 7-11s.

Notice also please that Jesus here isn’t attacking the temple itself—although in time

we will come to learn of his serious differences with the high priests and the Sadducees who both collaborated with the Romans and ran the temple cult. But here Jesus seems to be attacking the very way in which the temple itself seems to have become a kind of magnet for bad business, corrupting the worship of God with the worship of money, a kind of “commodification” of religion which means making something into an item—a commodity—that can be bought and sold—like “indulgences” for example that in Martin Luther’s day had become a way for the pope to raise money for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome by “marketing” forgiveness, of all things. And by the way, maybe you saw in the papers not long ago that good Pope Benedict XVI whom we regularly pray for has once again authorized the church’s use of indulgences—although I think they’re being a little more sensitive about how they’re “marketing” them. But lest we Protestant types think we’re above the

“commodifying” of religion, just pause for a moment to think about the world of televangelism—remember Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s promotions in the name of religion and, for that matter, the Prosperity Gospel perversion that is rampant not only in this country but that so called evangelicals have been happy to export to Latin America and Africa.

It’s probably more than a decade ago now that I heard the well-known African American philosopher/theologian Cornel West—now a professor at Princeton—speak as the keynoter at our annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Day commemoration at the University of Michigan. Dr. West, whom you’ve probably seen on TV—Bill Maher has him as a panelist quite a bit—is a self-avowed democratic socialist who also happens to be a Christian—the son of a Baptist preacher from Sacramento. Well that morning in Ann Arbor, Dr. West used two phrases I found so memorable that I’ve never forgotten them and have cited them time and

again. Speaking in the secular context of a public university's celebration of Dr. King, Dr. West told the crowd that for the sake of the health and well-being of our great American universities that we needed to cultivate in their midst "**centers of non-market values**" and "**fiduciary communities**" — which we well might paraphrase as "communities of trust" or "commitment communities." As a campus pastor at the time I couldn't help but think that, at our best, that's a wonderful way of describing just what our campus ministries are called to be: "centers of non-market values" and "communities of commitment and trust" located within and at the edge of the university, related to the university and nestled in the midst of the academic community — but at the same time centers of non-market values and communities whose commitment was to more than just research and learning — and intercollegiate athletics — communities who owed their loyalty and sense of purpose to Someone beyond the academic "market place,"

communities that marched to the drum of a different drummer—a Drummer concerned for but never merely a servant of the culture and economy of the university.

As Yahweh began by reminding Moses on the mountain-top in our Hebrew Scripture reading: “*I AM the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have **no other gods before me.***” Get that!?! **No** other gods. No golden calves, as the story soon goes on to demonstrate. No phony religiosity or false piety that we humans like to throw up as a smoke screen before God, as the prophets would forever be reminding Israel. No collusion with the powers that be like those who would come in Jesus’ day to run the temple cult, oppressing the poor and currying favor with the rich. No commodification of religion as something that can be bought and sold like so many pigeons or lambs—or in fact any kind of religion in which offerings and prayer and other acts of worship can be

thought of as substitutes for everyday justice doing and humility and truly righteous behavior—precisely the kind of behavior outlined in God’s ten words spoken to Moses on the mountaintop—words not intended to be inscribed on monuments in our courthouses, but inscribed on the hearts and consciences of us believers.

Paul got it right in today’s reading from his first letter to the Corinthians, good Greeks who both loved wisdom—*philo-sophy* they called it—and who loved to make money, living as they did in a great trading city on the Greek isthmus between Italy and the East. Utter foolishness Paul called his theology of the cross of Jesus—foolishness, that is, to wisdom-loving Greeks and a scandal, literally a stumbling block, to pious Jews—this idea we heard from Jesus’ own lips last week that *“whoever who want to save their life will lose it, and whoever would lose their life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”* Foolish and/or scandalous, Paul admitted, to

conventional-thinking folks accustomed to living in a market economy in which a price can be put on anything—including salvation.

But did you notice the irony of Jesus' question following his great proclamation of a theology of the cross last week: "*For what will it **profit** them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life,*" he then asked, with in my mind's eye a little smile lifting the corners of his mouth. What "profit" indeed in letting go rather than hanging on, in being generous rather than greedy, in being open-handed rather than close-fisted? Sheer foolishness! But foolishness that is wiser than human wisdom and weakness that is stronger than human strength—the foolishness—and scandal—of the cross.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.