

Sunday, March 7, 2021

Sermon: Jesus Confronts Institutional Injustice

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Friends, I was speaking with Amira earlier and realized that I needed to ask her to co-preach with me today. It is an honor and a privilege to have, not just one of my colleagues in ministry, but also a dear friend who is so like Jesus. I am so grateful for you, Amira, and your presence here and in my life and at our church.

Today, Jesus goes into the temple and experiences injustice at the temple. Jesus, like the prophets before him, sees injustice happening in the place where we are supposed to be worshipping God. And the way that you worship God is by loving one another and caring for one another. The prophet, Micah, said what does the Lord require of you, but to live humbly, to act justly, to love mercy, to love living in a relationship of love with one another, and to walk humbly with God and with one another. That is the whole point of this and Jesus, from within his Jewish prophetic tradition, says that we're missing the point. We've missed the plot. Why? Because this place, as the Gospel of John says, has turned into a marketplace, a place where we buy and sell. Essentially buy and sell God's love and God's care. And if you cannot buy and you cannot sell then you are left out. Jesus goes to that religious institution and he says that this is not how God wants us to live with one another. There are some people who are excluded from God's love when we live this way and God doesn't want to exclude anyone.

There are many pitfalls that Christian white pastors like myself have messed up with this passage. We have preached it in an anti-semitic way. A way where it says that Jesus was against Judaism. Jesus wasn't against Judaism. Jesus did this because of his Jewish roots because of the Jewish prophets before him that said the very same thing whenever religion went awry. Jesus says we can do better. The prophets before him said we can do better. God wants to include everyone and not have anyone excluded.

It's become aware to me that I should talk more about the ways in which institutions today, including in the United States, have failed to live into this vision that Jesus gives where everybody is included. The Covid bill is one example of this where we can use the wealth that we have. In the richest country the world has ever seen, there are people, especially our black, indigenous, and brown siblings, that have been dramatically hurt by Covid more than our white siblings on a systemic level when you do the ratio of it. And we need this Covid relief bill. There are certain people who are clogging it. How do we put pressure on our politicians to live in a more just and loving world without blocking these bills that are meant to help people?

This is part of the institution that Jesus wants us to transform also the continued military-industrial complex where we bomb other countries when we could be using that money to help other countries and to help ourselves, as well. Just one more thing and then I'm going to bring Amira into this. Dan Price is one of our prophets today. He is CEO of a company that cut his pay by millions of dollars so that everybody at his company could get seventy thousand dollars a year. He wrote this, "A fifteen dollar minimum wage, our government says we can't afford it. Two thousand dollar checks, our government says we can't afford it. Universal health care, our government says we can't afford it. Bailout small businesses during Covid, our government says we can't afford it. Bomb the middle east for \$750 billion a year, our government says we can afford that. It's all about where we put our priorities."

Rev. William Barber II, one of our greatest prophets in the church today says this reminds us of another prophet. Isaiah 10 says, "Woe to those who make iniquitous decrees and don't help the poor. That's where we're at." William Barber says that we need to not just help the middle class, we need to not help the rich get wealthier, he says that we as Christians have the mandate to help lift up those who are on the margins, especially our poor siblings black, brown, white, and we can do that with this Covid bill. Thank you, Bill Magorian for sending me the William Barber interview.

I wanted to also talk about how one of the ways that we (and this is one of the key reasons I wanted Amira here - and I'm so grateful for you, Amira). One of the key things that we miss in Jesus going to the temple is that this isn't just about people out there who mess up - and I can get all fiery about people out there who mess up - this is also about me and how I mess up. Amira, you are teaching me to be a little more gentle with myself. Amira and I were talking earlier and I said that I need to be more "self-critical" about the things that I do. And Amira said, "No, you don't. You need to be more 'self-aware.'"

Some of you who watched our worship service last week messaged me in one way or another that I had failed in setting up our song in a way that gave it the appropriate historical context that it deserved. One of our members, Jeff Pratt, sang a spiritual from our African-American tradition going back all the way to slavery. And I basically just played it. I failed to give it the appropriate background that it deserved. It was a moment of cultural appropriation on my part and something that I am, as Amira says, "...becoming more self-aware of."

Amira Stanley: If I can just say a little bit about this - I truly feel that if we want to get through difficult situations like white supremacy, we have to do it in a way that is loving because this topic is very difficult and in most difficult things we want to avoid it once we start to feel how uncomfortable it is.

So, I'm often reminding people, like Adam, to watch your language because that's a habit and we want to move through this and learn how to be anti-racist, so we have to talk about this stuff and do it in a loving way.

Adam: I was watching a video earlier about cultural appropriation and it was just like a minute-long video of this black woman who's doing amazing work just talking about racism and cultural appropriation. She was wearing this shirt and she was doing this back and forth thing like her as a black woman and then her as a white person. She was wearing this shirt and when she was in the white person character says to her 'Hey, that's an ugly shirt, don't wear it, take it off.' So she takes off her shirt and gives it to the other person and then the other person is wearing the shirt. That person puts it on and she says, 'I thought you said that was ugly and that I should take it off,' and the white person says, 'Oh well, now it's cute because I'm wearing it.'

It was like you have opened my eyes to see the ways that I get caught up in the white supremacy that just exists within me and how I can be a little more gentle with myself as I move through it and become more aware of it. And it's as you say, 'a huge conversation' that's much more than we can do in a sermon but we've been doing it. And that's not to pat ourselves on the back but you've opened my eyes in many ways and I'm just so grateful.

Amira: Yeah, it's never-ending work. It's not, 'I'm an anti-racist.' It's more that, 'I'm going toward becoming anti-racist.' It's not something that stops, it's a continuation. And that's why I also think it's important that, if you are a church that it appears to be anti-racist, it's really important to have these conversations when

something like last week happened so that when people are thinking that we are leaning toward anti-racism and instead they're thinking, 'whoa, if they're anti-racist then that's totally inappropriate, they should know better.' So, it's really important to have this open communication. I have seen stories of black people that do not feel that it's offensive for a white person to sing a spiritual song and I know other people that have a huge problem with it. Is there a way to have a black person sing that song? It's just a conversation that should be had.

Adam: Emily says in the comment section that anti-racist should be a verb rather than a noun. It's always something that you're doing and moving towards.

Amira: There's no perfection. I mess up all the time as a black woman. I mess up.

Adam: It's easy to do in a white supremacist world. So, just to bring this all back together, this is part of the institutional part of America. Our song earlier today was When Jesus Wept and sometimes that's the appropriate response. Sometimes it's where Jesus goes into the temple and tries to clear things out. Sometimes that's the appropriate response. But, also the appropriate response, as Amira has said repeatedly, is that you have to talk it out. You have to go through the awkwardness and the pain of it altogether.

Thank you, Amira, for being gentle with me and helping me to be gentle with myself in this.

Amira: We can't genuinely do this work if we don't genuinely love ourselves through it. I want to see long-term growth for the world, for you, for the church, so we gotta love the heck out of us.

Adam: I think that is a beautiful way to end our sermon. Thank you, Amira. Amen