



First United Church of Oak Park

Always Reforming

Lamentations 1: Selected Verses

John Edgerton

Mark 11:15-17

The very first place Jesus goes after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem is to the Temple. And the very first thing that he does when he arrives is to make a huge ruckus in the courtyard. He overturns the tables of the money changers, declares that the Temple is to be a house of prayer for all people. It's very sort of rousing and inspiring for anyone who wants to lay claim to the Christian faith's history of reform, of lifting up the little guy. That's all well and good, but it leaves the question, what were the money changers doing there in the first place?

The courtyard of the Temple isn't just some marketplace where all manner of commerce is going on. There's a very good reason why money changers were there, and it raises for me the difficulty of reform, and why the Christian faith must always be reforming itself anew, never satisfied with what has come before, but challenging ourselves always to be reforming.

So why were the money changers there? Well, because it was Passover. And to faithfully observe the Passover there were a variety of things that would have to be done, telling the Exodus story, eating the paschal lamb and unleavened bread. But each pilgrim was also required to give the Temple an offering. It was a Passover offering and it was symbolic of the value of a person's life. It is a symbolic sort of repayment, giving to God the monetary value of my life, in thanksgiving for having been brought out of slavery. But how much is a life worth? Normally that's a kind of philosophical question, but Exodus 30 specifies that it is to be one half shekel. The same for a rich person as for a poor person, the same for young or old, pious priest or notorious roustabout, one half shekel. It's symbolic of the equal value of all life in God's eyes, a leveling of all the people as being equally in need of God's deliverance. It's very nice! It's a reform minded law intended to communicate and reinforce that all people are endowed with holy worth in God's eyes, whatever their social standing. It's a nice tradition, a reform-minded tradition.

The first thing you have to understand is that a half shekel is not a lot of money. A day's wages, maybe two, even for the poorest of the people. It is just plain not a lot of money. The second thing you have to understand is that a shekel is a unit of weight, like a pound, or a kilogram. You could buy a shekel of flour, or a shekel of meat, or a shekel of silver. And that's where the word shekel—meaning the coin, meaning currency—that's where that name came from. A shekel coin weighed one shekel of silver. In theory anyway.

But, that's where the problems start coming in. That's where this reform-minded tradition starts running into difficulties. Because unlike today when a dollar is a dollar is a dollar, in the ancient world, a shekel coin was not always worth the same thing. Because the shekel coins that were minted in, say, the cities of the Decapolis to the east of the Jordan, contained far less silver than the shekel coins minted in the city of Tyre on the Mediterranean Sea. Like maybe half as much as silver was used in the coins. Everybody knew this. Everybody knew that the Tyrian shekel contained the most silver. But it didn't really matter for a person's daily life when they were in their hometown; everybody in the Decapolis had Decapolis shekels, everyone in Tyre had Tyrian shekels, so no problem; it didn't make any practical difference how much silver was in the coin itself.

But once a year, for the Passover, everyone from the Decapolis and everybody from Tyre would all travel to Jerusalem, each carrying their one half shekel that symbolized the value of their life. But the people from Tyre would say, hey, my Tyrian shekel has twice as much silver as that Monopoly money they call a shekel in the Decapolis. I thought this was supposed to be about equality? And here I am paying double. Ah! Reform, it's complicated when it runs into real life!

So the Temple had to reform the reform. They said all right! All right! Everybody has to pay the same thing, one half shekel--but! It's going to be the Tyrian half shekel. Problem solved, right? Reform achieved? Well, that lasted for a while; the people from Tyre were satisfied that everyone was on the same footing again. But, then, now the folks from the Decapolis said—hey, where am I supposed to get a Tyrian half shekel, that's clear on the other side of the country, it's not fair to make me have to schlep across the country to get access to this weird coin and hold on to this weird money all year just for the Temple at Passover. And for the poorer people, who lived payday to payday, well, they just wouldn't have access to that currency at all.

Ah, reform is hard. So the Temple authorities said all right! We'll make sure there are money changers, at the Temple itself, in the courtyard. Wherever you're coming from, Galilee in the north, Decapolis on the east, Jericho in the south, wherever, you can change your local currency over into the official Temple-approved, equality-assured Tyrian half shekel. You can do it on your way in: no muss, no fuss. Problem solved, right? Reform achieved, right?

No, no, no, because the money changers, of course, were charging a fee for their services. It wasn't a lot per transaction, but they had to make it worth their while. And while this fee would be basically nothing to a rich person, to a poor person it would substantially increase what they were paying, not to mention that the people from the city of Tyre didn't have to pay any conversion at all, so now the people from the Decapolis began to complain and ahhhhhh. Every time! Every time the Temple authorities tried to reform this thing they kept running into some new hurdle, some new challenge, some new need to reform the reform on the original reform. And it wasn't even a lot of money! That's the thing. A half shekel wasn't a lot of money.

So at some point the Temple authorities kind of threw up their hands and said, that's it! This is as reformed as it's going to get, all right? We're done. Everyone pays the same thing, the Tyrian half shekel, everybody has access to the same money-changers, they're right in the courtyard, and other than that, we're done with reforming this tradition.

And that's how it stayed for a long time, Passover after Passover after Passover. Until one year when a poor man from the north, riding on a donkey at the head of a great crowd of worshipers, came to the courtyard, and started a ruckus. Overturning the tables of the money-changers, upsetting the status quo, calling again for reform to be taken up again, saying that this was supposed to be a house of prayer for all people, but instead it was a den of robbers! This offering was supposed to be about all people being equal in God's sight, and instead it had become a chance to part the poor from their money.

Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers. It's a story that raises for me the difficulty of reform, and why the Christian faith must always be reforming itself anew, never satisfied with what has come before but challenging ourselves always to be reforming.

I take it seriously because I'm somebody who cares about religious ritual, about the organization of religious life and practice. I'm somebody who wants to see the practices of the Christian faith be inclusive and upholding the dignity of all people—just like that one half shekel thing was trying to do. I take this story seriously because it shows how if I want to be a reform-minded religious person, I must be willing to be always reforming, always reforming, always reforming. I get it, I honestly get it, why the Temple authorities at some point just said—you know what, we're all through reforming the reforms, we're gonna call this good enough. I get it, how a religious community could decide to stick with the status-quo, how a business could decide it's too much work to be constantly reforming, how a city, how a country, could decide: you know what? These social advances have become entirely too much. We're done here, reform finished, we're going to call this good enough.

But, but, I've got some good news for you Christians. And that is that we cannot grow weary of reform. I don't mean that metaphorically, like we must not grow weary and rest on our laurels. I mean we cannot, because Jesus is coming. And he is coming to overturn the tables of any unjust structures, anything that stands in the way of God's children thriving.

Because Jesus is coming, riding on a donkey and at the head of a ragtag crowd. Jesus is coming, at the head of a column of school children shouting—hosanna! Save us from the terror of gun violence. Jesus is coming, at the head of a host of drag performers shouting—hosanna! Save us from the terror of senseless hate. Jesus is coming at the head of a host of those who are hungering for their daily bread, a host of those who want the earth to be habitable for their grandchildren. We cannot grow weary of the need to reform because Christ is coming, with good news for all people. Christ is coming to overturn the tables of all unjust structures.

Thanks be to God.