

# Occupy the Temple

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, LCSW,  
Associate Rector for Community Ministry,  
at the eleven o'clock service.  
March 11, 2012: The Third Sunday of Lent.  
Based on 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, and John 2:13-22.*

One night I was enjoying a brief refreshment or two after a daylong conference on palliative care with one of my co-presenters, a well-known physician from Montana. We were discouraged by the fact that we had spent another day presenting the same material to the same people. These people were lovely people, don't get me wrong. The audience that day included hospice workers, family members of patients who had died in hospice care, veterans of the still unsuccessful war on HIV/AIDS, and health care professionals: the front line folks. These people appreciated our presentations, and many identified new insights on their evaluation forms. But in church language, we were preaching to the choir and, with all due respect to the choir, we wanted to reach a wider audience.

My colleague suggested that the palliative care movement needed an organization like ACT UP, a group so dedicated to the cause of good end-of-life care that members would risk arrest by using street theatre, civil disobedience, and other transgressive actions to draw attention to and inform others about the need for good palliative care. I suggested that palliative care did have its own ACT UP . . . his name was Jack Kevorkian. My physician friend recoiled in horror. As someone entrusted with knowledge, power, and training to promote the health of the community, my colleague had taken an oath to do no harm and he was offended by Dr. Kevorkian's actions and he was mortified by my suggestion. Indeed I had my own doubts about physician-assisted suicide and some of the suggestions that came out of ACT UP mortified me too.

The problem with the type of activism that transgresses social expectations, good taste, and even the law is precisely that it is intended to surprise, shock, and even offend. And yet transgressive practice sets the stage for change by transgressing social expectations. The transgressive practice of change is often in tension with incremental or reformist change practice.

The history of women's ordination in the Episcopal Church in the United States was marked by the tension between reformist and transgressive practice. After years of discussing the roles of women in the Church, the General Convention could not agree how to reform the ordination canons to include women. In 1974 three retired transgressive bishops took things into their own hands and ordained 11 women in Philadelphia. Two years later the General Convention approved the ordination of women.

Former Jesuit priest and theologian Robert Goss, writing in the early 1990s about this morning's Gospel passage, suggested that it was as if Jesus ACTED UP. Twenty years later I would like to update that language and suggest that Jesus occupied the temple. That is to say he engaged in the transgressive practice of change. He walked into the temple, turned the tables on the authorities and drove the moneychangers out. The scholars tell us that this particular action, Occupying the Temple, was the motivation behind the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

When Jesus transgressed temple protocol and social expectations, he knew that he could be arrested, tortured and even killed for his actions. The same is true of Gandhi and The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The American colonists who transgressed social expectations in the real Boston Tea Party also were well aware of the potential consequences of their actions. Members of ACT UP, Occupy Wall Street, and others who practice transgressive social change know they risk arrest and fines. We prepare for it. Usually the preparation involves education in non-violent response to hecklers and police, selection of certain people who will not be arrested and help those who are, and of course saving money to pay bail and fines should they be assessed. In reality an important part of this type of transgressive change practice is a willingness to accept the consequences and a belief that others will be inspired to support change by the example of one's actions.

Recently there has emerged in our political discourse a different type of change practitioner. Rather than overturning unjust systems, these people prefer to turn back the clock to a past time when social policy was based on belief rather than knowledge. They burn books, even sacred books such as the Koran; they question the value of scientific knowledge and hold up universities and public education as objects of scorn; they degrade and debase their opponents through personal attacks. They protest at funerals, medical clinics and even shoot and kill people who do not agree with them. And then these bullies use constitutional protections of free speech and freedom of religion as get-out-of-jail-free cards. This is not the transgressive practice of change but rather bullies frustrated by life in an open society.

More subtly but no less frightening is the economic bullying of women by religious groups who object to paying health insurance benefits to provide birth control and genetic testing. The suggestion that the church or any religious group, employer, or insurance company should have anything to say about the very personal and private decisions adults make about intimacy, reproduction, and medical care frightens me. Interference in decisions about intimacy, reproduction and medical care are the hallmarks of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and have no place in a modern pluralistic democracy.

We should all be allowed to believe as we will. And please hear me say this and make no mistake about it: There are people of faith and people of good will who do not believe in genetic testing or who use birth control. However, their beliefs should not be allowed to limit the freedom of others. The fact that the Amish do not believe in driving motorized vehicles does not exempt them from paying their taxes even when the taxes go to support driving and other activities proscribed by their church. But no one requires the Amish to drive. If churches and other employers, based on their religious beliefs, don't want to provide certain health insurance benefits to women, then they should stop acting as employers.

Unfortunately the politics of bullying is affecting our public discourse. Talented people are reluctant to run for office and some of our long-serving and most gracious leaders leave early. On February 28th Republican Senator Olympia Snowe announced that she would not run for re-election this fall, ending 35 years of public service. As her reason for leaving she cited that an "atmosphere of polarization and 'my way or the highway' ideologies have become pervasive in campaigns and in our governing institutions."

On the other hand yesterday the *Times* described the relationship between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and International Monetary Fund Chief Christine Lagarde. The two are close friends who have opposing stances on how much money is needed to protect vulnerable economies of Europe, and how that money should be raised. Ms. Lagarde and Ms. Merkel appear to be opposites: the glamorous, Chanel-clad French extrovert and the grounded German introvert who was recently spotted doing her own grocery shopping in the same suit jacket she had worn to sign the new European fiscal pact in Brussels earlier that day. In spite of the tough negotiations and different personal styles, these women have a warm relationship that transcends their differences. They are on a first-name basis. They frequently exchange text messages and gifts, and they even eat together. What a strange and even transgressive relationship. Politicians with differing views, who work together for the common good. What will they think of next?

Loving your enemy? Doing good to those who hate you? That is transgressive. So transgressive that it might even get you killed. But remember that even if it does, we believe that when they killed Jesus, God initiated the most transgressive act in human history: He overturned death itself.

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