

Earth Sunday Reflection
Tiffany Curtis

John 2:13-16
April 26, 2015

Scripture Reading: Gospel of John 2:13-16

¹³The Passover was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making God's house a market-place!'

Good morning, everyone. When Julie and Rob invited me to share a reflection on divestment and climate justice, I realized that I actually have never explored divestment through an explicitly theological lens, and so I am grateful for the invitation to do so briefly with all of you today.

Pretty immediately after I received this invitation to speak, an image from scripture came to me—the striking story of Jesus throwing over the tables of the money-changers in the temple, which Christine just read for us from John, and which is written in all four gospels of the New Testament.

I remember when I was a child, this story always unsettled me.

I grew up in a tight-knit immigrant church family in Los Angeles. The people I was closest to earliest in my life are mostly from Mexico and El Salvador—Miguel, Juan Carlos, Carmen...They were my people, and I loved them—I loved praying with them, reading the Bible, singing praise songs, grilling carne asada in the park after church... I felt safe and loved in my church community.

But I also experienced and survived violence in my childhood, and I remember that this story of Jesus felt violent to me.

The intensity of picturing my beloved Jesus, someone who was supposed to love me unconditionally, with a whip in his hand, seething with rage, and righteously overturning tables, pouring out bags of coins on the ground...it scared me. It made me feel uncomfortable, a little unsafe.

At another stage in my life, I loved this image of Jesus, finding it inspiring in its intensity and the pure flame of passion that it depicted.

Now, turning to this story again, as an image for divestment, I am struck in a new way. With the help of some Biblical footnotes, I noticed a new detail this time around: doves are explicitly mentioned in each version of this story. Doves were the sacrifice that was bought by those who could not afford more expensive, elaborate

offerings for ritual sacrifices to God at the temple. In the times of Jesus, this demographic who bought doves at the temple was especially poor women, such as widows, who had very little access to economic resources.

So, in this story, Jesus is not just angry about commerce in the house of God, Jesus is furious about economic exploitation, so much so that he takes direct action to impact and escalate the situation.

The escalation of student divestment activism in Boston these past 2 weeks, particularly at Harvard, Boston College, and Tufts, has been inspiring to watch unfold, as I reflect on both the symbolic and tangible impacts of divestment from fossil fuels.

In a world in which women and children of the global majority, citizens of the so-called Global South, who use the least resources and have the smallest carbon footprints, are the most impacted by the affects of climate instability, are fossil fuel companies not the merchants exploiting the most vulnerable among us?

Opportunistic at best, sinister at worst, transnational fossil fuel companies run one of the most immoral and profitable business models on this planet, and all of us are their customers, whether we like it or not.

As a community organizer, I believe in my bones that organizing and escalating a social movement is the only way we are going to impact these billion-dollar industries that are pillaging our planet and contributing to the deaths of billions of vulnerable beings—humans, animals, and plants alike.

I confess that this image of Jesus tearing through the temple with his whip and throwing oppressive economics out of the house of God, is not exactly an image of a social movement. Jesus acts pretty much alone in this story. But it is an inspiring example of the ferocity, tenacity, and courage that we need to tear down the structures that are thwarting the movement of God's love and justice on this planet. It offers a vivid image of the energy and escalation we need to divest ourselves and our institutions from financial gain from economic exploitation.

As we all know, your faithful divestment as a church community is truly a cause for celebration, and it also a single, joyful step in a much longer journey, a journey for which we are likely going to need some of the energy of that temple-cleansing Jesus we see in the Gospel.

But, I want to come back for a minute to what I said when I started my reflection: when I was younger, I found this story scary. And if I am honest with myself and with you, I still do. There is something frightening about the rage and violence of Jesus in this story. And I think there is something frightening for some of us in **accessing** our inner flame of anger, the parts of ourselves who actually might act with such pure passion. The guiding image of today, laying down our lives, rising up

in love is beautiful, liberating, and scary, all at once. What does it look like to lay down our lives? What comfort, habit, safety, certainty, do we have to let go in order to rise up in love and freedom? I don't know about you, but I oscillate between piercing moral clarity and real, tangible fear.

I know that sacrifice of time, talent, and treasure in the work of justice is the least I can do as a light-skinned North American with a master's degree. I also know a sinking feeling of fear, as a woman, and a survivor of violence. The instability of it all scares me. What more violence might we face as this movement rises to radically change these systems of exploitation? Will I be safe? Will I have to lay down too much in the fight to get there?

This might not surprise you, but I don't have a clear resolution to this tension I feel between loving and fearing the temple-cleansing Jesus. What I **DO** know is that my heart burns with passion as I walk along the path of my life with the Risen Christ, and that sometimes She is hidden from me in the most **obvious of places**, like the brown and black faces of women like the ones I grew up with--who give the hard-earned work of their hands to God, and whose lives are threatened daily by ruthless industry and social injustices. The heartbreak and love I feel for these sisters of ours, the ones I am blessed to accompany, and the ones I will never know in this life, burns in my heart and I know that I must keep laying down my burdens and hoping that God will liberate us all. Even in my fear, I pray for the spirit of justice to topple the tables of oppression that occupy this world-God's glorious, temple that stretches from sea to sky, from continent to continent, from the depths to the heights. May it be so.