

## Sustainability

*Isaiah 50:4-9, Philippians 2:5-11, Psalm 118, and Matthew 21:1-17*

I have a word for you: **Sustainability**. Almost every area of human activity now concerns itself with sustainable practices: food, energy, environment. But I want to tell you about a different kind of sustainability – sustaining the church in a secular culture. I have a gigantic affirmation of you to make: You are sustaining the church. That's quite a claim, so let's see if I can persuade you.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem to overthrow religious institutional practices of the temple because they are not sustainable. Note: The cleansing of the Temple is inexplicably left out of the Gospel lesson by the lectionary creators, so I've added the rest of the story.

Palm Sunday is not a **parade**; it's a **parody** of the politics of the world. Think of John Stewart and The Daily Show. Jesus has not come to Jerusalem for a **praise service** but for a **house cleaning**.

Jesus comes to **the Mount of Olives** where David went to grieve over Absalom's conspiracy (2 Sam. 15:30-31), and where the Lord says he will stand to defeat the enemies of Jerusalem. In Zechariah's powerful vision the Mount of Olives will be split in two and the Lord shall stand with one foot on the left side and one foot on the right side of the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:1-5).

Now, for the parody: A conquering king enters the city in triumph pretending to be a god, but Jesus enters the city as the servant of God who leaves all other kings shut-mouthed (Isaiah 52:15). A conquering king rides a stallion, Jesus a donkey.

Conquering kings enter Jerusalem through the main gate; King Jesus comes through the Sheep Gate. This is where the lambs for the slaughter were herded into the temple for sacrifice. A person had to bend over and almost crawl through the opening. No wonder Philippians 2:5-11 is such essential Christology: **though [Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself.** Jesus is a back door king and we act like front door people. The king of the world comes in the back door not to subjugate but to save. Here's passionate humility.

Some folks, knowing their Bibles, realize that Jesus is enacting Psalm 118 – the song for the entry of the king. Here comes the king! Others, not having read Scripture in years, ask, "Who is this?"

So the city in turmoil struggles with scripture and its meanings. Some of the people, reading Scripture rightly, but getting their politics backward, embrace Jesus as King. Look, you can nail down your politics and go to Scripture for justification or you

can start with Scripture and let that determine your politics. The first is idolatry; the other is hard on the heart and the nerves. But it is not easy to maintain a scriptural reading steeped in suffering love. When Jesus cleanses the Temple, the people realize that he is not the super patriot they thought him to be. Their Scripture reading said Jesus was king and their politics said that he would defeat the Romans in battle. Today some weak-minded Baptists are reading their commandments wrong and before we know what happened, they will break down the wall of separation between church and state.

The crowd, disappointed in Jesus' political agenda, deserts him like voters in a mid-term panic. Their hosannas turn to crucify him. People are unlikely to embrace a cross if there is an alternative. It is unlikely that we will sacrifice to pay the price for social justice, because "No one wants to personally feel the pinch." We don't need to soak the rich, but save the rich or at least teach them all to have the giving spirit of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. Don't raise their taxes; convert them to give enough money to feed the world.

Entering Jerusalem, Jesus went to the temple because religious sacrifice was masking economic injustice. Jesus shuts down the business end of the temple for a day - overturning the tables of the money changers. The thieves in the temple are thicker than fleas, because wherever there's dishonest money to be made thieves multiply. The Money Exchange in Jerusalem was more corrupt than payday lenders and more adept at ill-gotten gains than Goldman Sachs. The leaders of the Temple treasury department cooked the books and exploited the poor in the name of God. This is not spring cleaning orchestrated by the Board of Trustees; this is a restoration project. Not redecoration but repentance. Imagine Jesus in Congress or on Wall Street overthrowing the desks of the thieves. This is regime change. **Forget the sheriff. There's a new king in town.**

Yes, Jesus cleaned out the temple of thieves but no one went to jail. The Sadducees had the Jewish Supreme Court in their back pocket. Rob a bank of \$900 and get 20 years in the pen. Rob investors of \$20 billion and get a pension. The thieves were all back the next day and business was brisk. The Wall Street Journal recently noted that all those exotic loans that got us in trouble 3 years ago are back in spades. Big money attracts big thieves.

Exit thieves and robbers; enter the blind and the lame. By the law in Leviticus, the blind and the lame were prohibited from the temple (Lev. 21:17). Jesus invites the lame, the blind, and the poor to join him in the temple.

Now, Lev. 5:7 permitted the poor to substitute a dove and pigeon if they could not afford sheep for a sacrifice. The money changers took advantage because the price charged for doves and pigeons escalated faster than the cost of a gallon of gas.

Even the children, who had always been excluded from the temple, are heard praising Jesus in the temple. No wonder, “Let the children come unto me,” was a revolutionary saying. It contradicted the temple’s exclusion of children. No matter what kind of budget Congress passes, they must remember the children. One in eight American children go to bed hungry every night (Oracle Think Quest, [www.library.thinkquest.org](http://www.library.thinkquest.org)). Eliminate the 30 billion dollar farm subsidy and the American farmer, receiving a fair price for his wheat, corn, and rice will feed this hungry world. Remember the children.

A pastor asked his congregation, “What will it take to sustain the church?” The answers: Good coffee. Contemporary worship. A Christian nation. Shorter sermons. Well, I have a different list.

Do we see? A religious institution can become unsustainable. So we ask what is required to sustain the First Baptist Church of Dayton. Some say the church is doomed. Well, in 1879, the Cincinnati Gazette had an editorial: “The baseball mania has run its course. It has no future as a professional endeavor.” This afternoon at 1:10 p. m. the Cincinnati Reds will play the Pittsburgh Pirates. Next Sunday morning at 10:30 the First Baptist Church will celebrate Resurrection Sunday. The church is not dead.

Only God can sustain a church. Remember the lines from *Raisin in the Sun*? “There is still God in this house.”

In our OT lesson, Isaiah says that the Word of the Lord is a sustaining practice. **The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.** It may seem an outlandish claim in a world as disconnected from the Bible as ours, but it is a conviction that I hold with all my mind and heart. The Scripture, the Church’s book, sustains a weary church.

Through Scripture and Sacrament God makes us a new people and sustains the church. A cartoon in the New Yorker shows a man making inquiry at the information counter of a large bookstore. The clerk, tapping his keyboard and peering intently into the computer screen, replies, “The Bible? . . . . That would be under self-help.”

The Bible doesn’t belong in the self-help section next to pop psychology books, prosperity gospel works, and positive thinking drivel. If the Bible is about you and your path to personal wealth, I am going to throw it in the trash and stop preaching.

Actually, thankfully, the Bible is relentlessly theocentric. It is not about you and me, brother and sister, it is about God.

Our stories sustain the church. **Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.** I can’t tell the story of God’s formation of my life without the story of First Baptist Church Dayton. We want to know one another’s stories

because we are curious. We can't tell our stories without one another's stories. Much of our loneliness and alienation is rooted in our silence – not telling our story to one another. It takes time, talk, listening, honesty and trust and risk to tell our own story. Part of the church's task is to take all the time necessary to allow our stories to be shaped to the story of Christ. Our stories contribute to the up building of the Church – so that finally our stories will be joined in one mighty prayer. Our stories create a history that others will inherit when they are responsible to sustain First Baptist Church.

This means that memory sustains the church, especially the memory of those who lived well. Think of a person from the past who helped you love God and love this church. Call that person's name. As long as we keep company with those who have been faithful, those masters of the faith who teach us what it means to be the body of Christ, the church will be sustained. Memory sustains the church.

We are here for those who came before us because without us they can't be made perfect, and for those who will come after us. We are here to worship Jesus. An 85 year old woman, in a short story, stands by her kitchen sink, staring out the window, and the story ends with these words: "Can you guess why this old woman's chin is lifted? Why does she breathe as if to show exactly how it's done? Why should both of her shoulders, usually quite bent, brace so square just now? She's guarding the world. Only, nobody knows." So we are here sustaining the church, and we might not even know it, but that's a good thing. In humility, you are sustaining the church. Thank you and God bless you.