

Last Thursday night Resurrection hosted a chili dinner meeting for residents of the Diplomat Hotel around the corner from us on Sheffield Avenue.

My thanks to everyone who contributed; the response from our congregation was characteristically generous and hospitable.

At that meeting, residents expressed their frustration at their situation: the court has ordered them to move out by March 24 because of a laundry list of safety code violations in the building long left unattended by the ownership.

The court has delayed its decision on monetary restitution, however, so residents of the Diplomat, who are there because their modest incomes limit their options, have to look for a new place to live now but wonder if and when they'll get any money to move later.

After the meeting, one of our serving crew sent me a perceptive email, writing:

*I don't understand much so I can't criticize or place blame.*

*It is perplexing, though, that a landlord/owner can suck and not follow the rules, the City can suck and not enforce the rules, which ends up resulting in people who did nothing other than minding their own business and paying for a place to live being, well, you know, (rhymes with [suck]).*

There is surely a reasonable explanation for how it happened.

The landlord will tell you about how he has been there providing affordable housing long before any civic do-gooders cared about the issue.

The city will defend its well-founded concern for the safety of the residents and the surrounding neighborhood.

The court will explain to you how it is operating with procedural integrity, protecting due process and doing its due diligence in measuring out proper justice.

And of course, all three would be right.

But their rightness doesn't help the rent-paying residents disrupted and displaced through no fault of their own; it just leaves them scrambling with little time and less money in a wretched economy in gentrified Lakeview for an affordable place to live.

Even if we can't place blame, it is obvious that something is dreadfully wrong, something bigger than the individual parties involved, something systemic.

Indeed, the heart of the problem isn't any of the individual players; the game itself sucks.

This is the lesson learned in the soup kitchen and the homeless shelter when the volunteer begins to pursue with real depth the question, "why are these people here?"

Some whole bigger than the sum of its often beautiful parts is broken; we use words like hunger and racism and injustice and poverty to name these faceless forces that leave innocent and not-so-innocent people...*well, you know, (rhymes with [suck]).*

Biblically, the people of God, both Israel and the church, have always traced the problem to a cancer in the callous, greedy, fearful human heart, and named it sin.

It is insidious and unrelenting, and it plays itself out not only in individual choices but also in wider systems and situations like the one now burdening our neighbors at the Diplomat.

But it is not only a problem out there; biblical honesty demands that we look first in the mirror and see the sin in our own hearts and our own community.

C.S. Lewis, reprising the voice of the insightful title demon from his book *The Screwtape Letters*, records Screwtape raising a glass in hell and saying in his proposed toast: *...it will be an ill day for us if what most humans mean by "religion" ever vanishes from the Earth.*

*It can still send us the truly delicious sins.*

*The fine flower of unholiness can grow only in the close neighborhood of the Holy. Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar.*

*("Screwtape Proposes a Toast, 1962, as printed in The Screwtape Letters, Revised Edition, NY: Collier, 1982, pp. 171-172.)*

That, of course, is exactly where the money changers set up their tables in the temple.

Now all you Jesus fans out there, don't be blaming the money changers.

They are doing the best they can to provide a valuable and an important human service.

The temple is the holy dwelling place of the holy God.

This God has graciously provided a way for unholy humans, those with the cancer in their hearts and lives, to purge the sin and purify themselves, to make themselves right with God, righteous enough to be in God's holy presence.

The way for this to happen is through the appropriate sacrifice of approved animals.

Many people cannot logistically provide their own approved animal, so the money changers provide the helpful, convenient service of identifying ritually clean animals and selling them right there at the entrance to the temple.

They also change the money, because most people have Roman coins in their pocket, and Roman coins have the graven image of Caesar claiming to be a god, which violates God's commandment.

That won't do, especially when the whole point is to overcome sin and get right with God, so the money changers provide currency exchange for a very modest fee.

They aren't making a killing on the exchange rate at all; just enough to cover expenses and keep people gainfully employed.

The prices are reasonable, and there are smaller animal options available for the poor, and what could be more important for anyone to spend whatever income they have on than their relationship with God?

It's certainly better than spending it at the liquor store, right?

It's all very reasonable.

The problem isn't that we change money.

The problem is that money changes us.

Whenever God makes a way, humanity builds a toll booth.

Jesus isn't mad at the guy inside making an honest living making change.

The system is broken; there should be no barriers to God at all, physical or economic.

Jesus is the way, Jesus is the temple, Jesus is the meeting place of God and humanity, freely available to all, so the tables and the animals and the cashboxes are an insult to him and an interloper to his entire purpose and reason for being.

That's why he flies off the handle.

He isn't just knocking down tables; he is overturning an entire system.

Which is always messy.

Notice what happens in the midst of the chaos.

Animals run wild in the temple of the Lord, alive and free.

Coins, graven images of an idol, roll into the holy house of God.

Sinful, unclean people are able stroll in without performing the proper sacrifices.

The temple itself is violated, desecrated, made unclean.

God's hands are dirty.

Which is to say, God is in our presence, and what the system was designed to do has finally been achieved, ironically enough, by getting the system out of the way.

Jesus doesn't just destroy the Temple system, however; he replaces it.

The place where God and humanity come together shifts from a building to a body.

In his book The Heart of Christianity, Marcus Borg explains:

*According to temple theology, certain kinds of sins and impurities could be dealt with only through sacrifice in the temple.*

*Temple theology thus claimed an institutional monopoly on the forgiveness of sins; and because the forgiveness of sins was a prerequisite for entry into the presence of God, temple theology also claimed an institutional monopoly on access to God.*

*In this setting, to affirm "Jesus is the sacrifice for sin" was to deny the temple's claim to have a monopoly on forgiveness and access to God...it subverted the sacrificial system.*

*It meant: God in Jesus has already provided the sacrifice and has thus taken care of whatever you think separates you from God; you have access to God apart from the temple and its system of sacrifice.*

*It is a metaphor of radical grace, of amazing grace. (Borg, The Heart of Christianity, pp. 94-95)*

*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up, says Jesus, but he was speaking of the temple of his body, and the rest of John's gospel is the telling of that story.*

No longer do we go to God's house; now God comes to ours.

We are not in the temple; the temple is in us.

The temple, the broken body, the way to God with dirty hands named Jesus, is the bread and the identity we share around our table, where God calls to us and to all people in the words of the prophet Isaiah we hear every Easter Vigil:

*you that have no money, come, buy and eat!*

*Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price...*

*Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.*

This morning, it is bread and wine.

Last Thursday, it was chili and lemonade.

Always, it is God calling us, feeding us, reaching to us...and if there isn't room for everyone at the table, the money changers and the moneyless together, then get rid of the table.