

## THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE: A PROTEST AGAINST ECONOMIC INJUSTICE



As an exile in Babylon, Ezekiel gave hope to the Israelites by describing his vision for a temple rebuilt in Jerusalem.

St. Paul uses the temple as a metaphor, explaining that our bodies are as sacred as the temples, which were special and sacred.

Jesus reacts to the temple dirtied by the *business practices* of the money changers and sellers of oxen, sheep and doves.

Animal sellers were located not in the temple but in the surrounding courtyard where they plied their trade and sold animals to worshipers who needed to bring the proper sacrifice for God. Those who were obligated to purchase a sacrificial animal (those who, because they had a long journey to the temple, needed a fresh sacrifice) were exploited by the vendors and paid an exorbitant price.

The moneychangers were necessary because the Jews who came to worship needed to exchange their Roman currency into Jewish money to pay the temple tax. Like the animal sellers, the moneychangers, exploited the pilgrims and charged an exorbitant exchange rate (similar to [usury](#)).

The moneychangers and the animal vendors set up their businesses in the temple courtyard with the approval of the temple authorities who made a profit from the exchange of money and the sale of sacrificial animals to the pilgrims who needed to fulfill their religious obligations.

We hear the familiar story of Jesus directing his wrath at the money changers and sellers of animals but Jesus was also angry at the authorities who profited from this unjust economic enterprise. In Jesus's time the temple cultivated an economic system that was unfair and exploitative and he cleansed the temple in protest against not only the players, but also the authorities and the system that perpetuated this injustice.

The travelers, the poor, and all those who were at the mercy of the temple's economic authority, were outside the temple trying to get inside to worship. It is helpful for us to remember that rightful place of the poor is not at the margins of the Church; they are at the center. The rightful place of the poor is not at the margins of society. They must be included.

We have two modern examples of an economic system that is unfair and exploitative. First, payday loans, or short-term loans, that carry a small short-term interest rate that pencils out up to 360% a year. This is usury and usury violates Catholic teaching. Bishop Weisenburger of the Diocese of Salina, provides a concise description of payday loans and usury in this [nine-minute video](#).

A system that tolerates the transfer of great wealth from the poor to the rich is an example of structural sin because the system perpetuates this injustice.

Here's a second example: [the six largest banks in the nation now have 67% of all the assets in the U.S. financial system](#). Their asset growth has increased five times the rate of all the financial assets. The remaining 33% of the assets are divided up among 6,934 banks. The concentration of our financial assets in the hands of a few institutions was a primary cause of the Great Recession. The fact that this concentration is worse today, and 1400 banks no longer exist, is also a systemic issue of injustice.

Jesus took offense at the authorities, the system and the perpetrators of economic injustice. We are called to follow in Jesus's footsteps.

St. Paul's metaphor of the body as a sacred temple can be extended to society, because what is society but a community of people. Society is to be cherished; it is sacred because every one of its members is sacred. We do not show proper honor and respect to society when we allow it to be dirtied with injustice. By cleaning the system we are participating in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem – God's temple here on earth.

(Readings for 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time)



Office of Life, Justice, and Peace