

What is Holy Troublemaking?

Matthew 21:12-17

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On August 28, 1963, 260,000 people joined together in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was a march years in the planning by leaders of at least six prominent civil rights organizations. 260,000 people - black and white, northern and southern, men and women, poor and wealthy, from white collar businessmen to clergy to factory workers to the unemployed - rallied in Washington to call for an end to segregation and for the establishment of voting rights, fair wages, and desegregated education for Black Americans. When they arrived at the Lincoln Memorial, a number of powerful speakers shared visions of a better America but none more impassioned, articulate, and moving than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His "I Have A Dream" speech, delivered with his thundering voice and compassionate heart, moved a nation into action and change.

This weekend, we celebrate Dr. King and the incredible impact he had on this country. Tomorrow is his birthday and, as many have pointed out, it is, ironically, also inauguration day. What better weekend, then, to begin our new sermon series, "Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints".

The series takes its name from a book written for young people by author Daneen Akers. Akers believes in the power of stories to connect us with each other, to motivate and inspire us, and to help us draw from the wisdom of those who have gone before us. She writes, "As a person of faith, I've wanted to share with the children in my life the stories of people of faith who make the right choice, even when it isn't the easy choice, who resist the status quo when the status quo is harming people." So, she gathered together stories of 36 people from diverse faith traditions and backgrounds who "have worked for love, compassion, and justice in their corner of the world, even if that meant rocking the religious boat. While their lives look different, what each of them has in common is that they used their faith to work for the good of everyone."

Akers' book has now been turned into a Sunday School curriculum which we will be using over the next several weeks in our children's, youth, and adult faith formation. Each week, we will talk about one Holy Troublemaker or Unconventional Saint during worship while our kids learn about that person in Sunday School. Hopefully, that will make opportunities for some great intergenerational conversations!

Akers came up with the title "Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints" by combining statements from two important civil rights leaders who were holy troublemakers themselves. Many of us remember former House Representative John Lewis who passed away in 2020. Lewis was speaking at the opening ceremony of an extensive collection about Rosa Parks in the Library of Congress when he said, "Rosa Parks inspired us to get in trouble. And I've been getting in trouble ever since. She inspired us to find a way, to get in the way, to get in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble." Akers took his words and combined them with a statement by Bayard Rustin, the mastermind behind the organization and logistics of the March on Washington, who said, "we need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers".

Rustin was, in fact, one of the inspirations for Akers to write this book. He was a black gay man who advocated for the rights of many different people in different situations - Black Americans but also laborers, prisoners, and LGBTQ folks to name a few. He was also a Quaker who believed in pacifism and non-violence. At 36, he traveled to India to learn about non-violent resistance from those who had worked with Gandhi. He then taught what he had learned to Dr. King as King was organizing the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The two went on to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference together. Rustin is one of the Holy Troublemakers Akers features in her book.

So, what is holy troublemaking? There are a few different characteristics. First of all, holy troublemaking involves disrupting systems which are harmful to people. So, if we take the Civil Rights movement as an example, saying you believe segregation is bad is a good thing to do but holy troublemaking is actually taking steps to change the systems that support segregation. That may be in ways that are very visible like participating in a march, but it may also be work you do behind the scenes like Rustin or something that touches others at an emotional level like creating art, music, poetry or drama.

Secondly, holy troublemaking is nonviolent and honors the sacred worth and dignity of all people. Holy troublemaking isn't passive. It is actively pursuing a better life for others. And that means it can be really hard to do over time, yet real change takes time. So, holy troublemakers need to consider what will sustain them - most importantly, rest, joy, and community.

Finally, holy troublemakers believe that people aren't the enemy. The enemy is ignorance - ignorance that leads to harm - and the systems that perpetuate that harm. Dr. King believed in nonviolence because he thought that it could free people who are oppressed but also their oppressors. Holy troublemakers do not dehumanize anyone - including the oppressors - but try to recognize and respect their humanity and remain curious about them.

As Christ-followers, holy troublemaking is at the center of our faith. Jesus was a holy troublemaker. Whether you embrace a lower Christology and think about Jesus mostly as a person or a higher Christology which emphasizes Jesus' divinity, Jesus was a holy troublemaker seeking to challenge and change the oppressive systems in which he lived. For example, every time he healed on the Sabbath, he in essence thumbed his nose at the Pharisees who were so concerned with maintaining the Jewish law that they chose to overlook the humanity of someone in pain. Jesus was challenging a religious system that perpetuated oppression.

Another example is when Jesus encounters the Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed by demons. She asks for his help but at first, he denies her because she is a Canaanite, a gentile, and therefore outside the Jewish community. Then, catching himself in a moment of prejudice and exclusion, he changes his mind and defies the expectations of his society by healing her.

And, of course, there is the story which is our scripture reading today. Now, some might say this isn't an example of Jesus and nonviolence because flipping over tables seems like a pretty violent act. And I think that for a lot of us, it feels out of character for Jesus. His is so clearly an ethic of love, and so much of the time he finds ways to directly challenge systems without this kind of explosive action. There are some biblical scholars who really downplay the significance of this event. They say that selling animals for sacrifice at the temple was just logical given how

far so many people traveled to worship there and that since many travelers came from different places, it made sense to have somewhere they could exchange their money for the currency accepted at the temple. Some point out that the Court of Gentiles where these merchants and bankers would have been doing their business was a huge geographic area - over 25 acres. So, Jesus' protest would only have been seen by a few people. They question whether this could really have been the event which sealed Jesus' fate with the Jewish authorities.

But I think what is really significant here is why Jesus does this. For years, he has been challenging both the Jewish officials and the Roman for perpetuating systems that oppress the poor. He has arrived in Jerusalem knowing that because of these challenges, he is likely to be crucified by the end of the week. And when he gets to the temple, what he sees displayed before him is acres and acres of economic activity that only serves to exploit and oppress the poor, perpetuates systems that line the pockets of the upper class and the priestly aristocracy.

I would agree that flipping over the tables borders on not being nonviolent. Yet, it draws attention to what is happening and how far those activities are from the vision of the kin-dom of God.

It's interesting that immediately after this incident, Jesus returns to healing the blind and the lame, which angers the chief priests and the teachers of the law - those who both uphold and benefit from the status quo.

Yet, this is the nature of this savior whom we follow. He cares for all of the people regardless of their economic status or nationality or gender. He prioritizes people over material possessions or adhering to rules and expectations that cause harm. He seeks to teach by word and example so as to address the ignorance that leads to bigotry. He is a holy troublemaker - and calls us to be, as well.

Over the next several weeks, we'll be talking about a variety of other holy troublemakers and unconventional saints. Some you will have heard of, others you may not have. Yet, all honor the beauty and diversity of human life and seek a better way for the future. May we learn from their example.

Amen.