

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite  
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## **“What Did Jesus Really Say (and Do)?”**

Has this been happening to you lately? You wake up a 4:30 a.m. and these kinds of thoughts go through your head:

“My mortgage is upside down, my hours just got cut at work, and my college graduate kid just moved into the basement with \$85,000 in student loans and an \$8.50 an hour part-time job with no benefits, and I’ll never be able to retire.”

These kinds of thoughts have been waking me up, and a lot of my friends, since the “Great Recession.” People are hurting economically, or they feel balanced on a precipice and just one more shake could knock them over.

If you’re waking up at 4:30 am with these thoughts, you are not alone. A recent survey on the Huffington Post Web site showed 60% of Americans think this economic fragility is the “new normal.”

“Five years of economic misery have profoundly diminished Americans' confidence in the economy and their outlook for the next generation,” Rutgers professor and survey co-author Carl Van Horn said in a statement.

Most survey respondents – 73 percent – had either lost their jobs or knew somebody who had. More than half said they have less money than they did before the recession, and 61 percent believe they will never fully recover.

This is what the young people who started the Occupy movement were trying to show. There's a small group who are making out very well these days, and the rest of us are suffering from a structurally bad economy that is unlikely to change. That's the 1% and the 99% language.

I asked myself; "What does the Bible have to say to me when I'm waking up at 4:30 am?" What does the Bible have to say to this generation of young people, those who have lost a decade of their lives through coming of age in this economy? They call themselves the "lost generation." Are they lost or do we in the churches have a message for them?

To answer these questions we have to change the way we (and here I mean specifically the UCC) read the Bible. We inherit a strong tradition of liberalism, and that has contributed a lot to the Christian faith; we Protestant liberals say it's not necessary to check your brain at the door of the church, for example. We accept and even celebrate modern science, equality and human rights—we think about things.

But that has also meant we live in our heads.

That doesn't help that much when what we're dealing with is such profound economic pain and anxiety in our own lives, our children's and grandchildren's lives and in the society around us.

When I teach at Chicago Theological Seminary, I start by saying, "Theology begins where the pain is." But now I am realizing that reading the Bible starts the same way. We need to start where the pain is.

Biblical scholarship in the liberal tradition such as that of the Jesus Seminar produces very valuable work on the historicity (or not) of biblical and extra biblical sources about Jesus. But at times it can feel like we're chasing Jesus down a rabbit hole.

I need a way of reading the Bible that will help me if I have \$85,000 of student debt and a minimum wage job. I need a way to read the Bible that will help me if my mortgage is underwater and I'll probably never be able to retire.

These things are real, and so are the forces that created this situation. Reality isn't biblical literalism. Somebody once asked Reinhold Niebuhr if the story of Adam and Eve being tempted in the garden was literally true. "Oh, no," said Niebuhr, "it's truer than that."

Existential truth. The truth that people do get tempted, they do give in to greed, they do exploit others and crash the economy. That's true. That's real.

Real. Temptation is real. Greed is real. Economic pain is real. Starting with the reality of the forces that created this awful economy, and the reality of what it's doing to the vast, vast majority of Americans, including myself, has helped me to connect emotionally with our scriptures and with Jesus of Nazareth.

What's our situation? We're in a debt crisis caused by banks doing risky subprime mortgages; when the housing bubble burst, it crashed the system. Across the economy, debt increased and net wealth decreased.

Jesus' central teaching, announcing his ministry, is about debt. After he had been tempted in the wilderness, he returns to Galilee "filled with the power of the Spirit." (Luke 4:14) He goes to Nazareth and stands up to read in his hometown synagogue. He chooses this text from the scroll of Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The “Year of the Lord’s Favor” is the biblical Jubilee. An every 50-year cycle when debts would be forgiven, slaves released and a true economic reboot of ancient Israel would take place.

Now, reading from sacred texts is all very well in our holy places, even the texts that challenge us to take care of the poor and the oppressed and forgive all debts. The people in the synagogue listening to Jesus read had heard this all before and Jesus was just another young man reading scripture. So, at first, the start to Jesus’ ministry is going okay. His hearers were impressed. The section of Isaiah from which Jesus reads, 61:1-2, is, in context, promise that Israel will be rewarded for acting justly and faithfully.

But all of a sudden, Jesus went on to claim “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21b) Jesus goes on to say there was prophetic judgment for those who didn’t really pay attention to those who didn’t do justice, who didn’t really do something for the poor and the oppressed, and actually go ahead and forgive debts. The crowd turns on him. They would have thrown him off a high cliff, but Jesus escapes. (Luke 4:16-30)

The people in the synagogue thought Jesus was dangerous because he actually expects people to stop paying lip service to their prophetic texts and actually act on them. Do justice, don’t just read about it, and then go home and eat your nice Shabbat meal.

The absolutely most dangerous thing Jesus brings up in his reinterpretation of Isaiah is that the “Year of the Lord’s Favor” is NOW. It’s all very well to talk about God and God’s promises, but nothing makes people who have made a lot of money through lending at high interest rates more angry than to suddenly declare, “Forgive the debts and let the poor start over.”

Forgiving debt is absolutely central to Jesus’ ministry.

That's how Jesus teaches us to pray: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.' (Matthew 6:12) It's a two-way street, a community of support, not exploitation.

This comes to a head when Jesus goes to Jerusalem for Passover and heads for the temple. "Then Jesus entered the Temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers." (Matthew 21:12) When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple in Jerusalem, he took on the brokers who were ripping off the pilgrims who came during Passover. These brokers (bankers) were in cahoots with the priestly class who ran the temple and together they would cheat pilgrims out of the just price of their offerings. The bankers would sell their own temple coinage in exchange for foreign money, charging interest on the transaction.

The temple in Jerusalem was in a sense the national bank of Israel in Jesus' time; it was a powerful national treasury that did not let its great wealth sit idle. The bank lent the money it collected at interest, violating Jewish tradition on lending, especially lending to the poor. These unjust lending practices drove many residents into extreme poverty and created the vast slum dwellers of Jerusalem.

There is a prophetic tradition on charging interest in the Hebrew Bible that Jesus is drawing on to challenge these unfair lending practices, which is that charging interest, or unfair interest is against God's will.

In the Transfiguration texts we heard for today, it is said, "A veil lies over their minds." (2 Cor. 3:15) A veil has been over our minds for too long now in how we read the scripture, especially on the economy.

We have to recognize that this economic pain many of us are in, and our anxiety about our future, and our kids and grandkids future, has been created by a system that runs on

greed. We need to name that greed for what it is: giving in to temptation. This insight doesn't make us saints and those who manipulate the economy the greatest sinners of all time. It does help us see that this is a system that is against the will of God, in our Christian faith, and we need to confront the system and demand better regulation across the board.

We also need to give ourselves a break and realize that the Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about in contrast to the Kingdom of Caesar is about people taking care of each other, sharing the pain, communicating "you don't have to face this alone." The communities of those who followed Jesus ate and drank together and enjoyed one another's company. We have to say to each other, "You are not alone."

You don't make any economic system into a god; only God is God and we judge an economy by how it does or does not support God's children.

When we "Occupy the Bible," we realize we are not alone at 4:30 a.m. God is with us. Through the teaching and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth we know that a more just and equitable economy is called the Kingdom of God. We know that our communities of faith are there for us, celebrating and supporting, eating and drinking together in anticipation of the full reign of God's justice and mercy. Amen.

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