

43 years ago, the social activist and historian Howard Zinn began an address with a few choice words to his audience about where he was coming from philosophically; words I find fitting to share as I begin my own remarks to you this morning:

“I start from the supposition that the world is topsy-turvy, that things are all wrong, that the wrong people are in jail and the wrong people are out of jail, that the wrong people are in power and the wrong people are out of power, that the wealth is distributed in this country and the world in such a way as not simply to require small reform but to require a drastic reallocation of wealth. I start from the supposition that we don't have to say too much about this because all we have to do is think about the state of the world today and realize that things are all upside down.”¹

As far as I can see, Zinn's words are as true now as they were in 1972 – quite possibly more so. They seem to me to express much the same sentiment as words we began with this morning, from the teacher Jesus: “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.”² And I say this to you up-front because I believe that in choosing to be hear this morning you have already shown your inclination towards this essential assumption: that things are all upside down. So, I want to say just enough today that we can begin to work together not just to articulate what is wrong, but to do what is necessary and right. Let's look, then, at the state of the world, and what it is calling us to do.

¹ Howard Zinn, as included in *Violence: The Crisis of American Confidence*

² The Gospel According to Matthew 20:16

On a newsprint page from some years ago, six-year-old Calvin is playing a board game with his best friend, an imaginary tiger named Hobbes. It's a game about real-estate speculation, high finance and the fickle hand of the market – a game about money, in other words. The odds have turned against young Calvin, and he is down on his luck and running out of the little pastel slips of paper the game uses for currency. The imaginary tiger seems on the verge of winning until Calvin reaches into the till, the rack of spare bills used in the game, and begins to pocket them. It's just a tragic turn of events, he explains: dire circumstances have forced him to rob the bank in their game of monopoly. An argument about the rules ensues and the social contract holding the game together unravels until Calvin and Hobbes begin stealing from and defrauding each other and the board is finally upended.³

The comic is an exaggeration of the game, the game is a simplification of the world, but the kernel of truth remains: international capitalism is a game of winners and losers, and when enough of the players figure that out, the whole thing comes apart. We live in a world in which little pieces of paper – or the bits of digital information that hold the promise of them – can be exchanged for just about anything, for better or worse. It is also a world in which people get sick and go hungry, suffer the cold and the heat and the absence of opportunity, all for the want of those same scraps of paper. The contours of life's possibilities, in fact sometimes the very opportunity to continue living, is shaped and determined by a person's wealth. And while our intertwined modern world makes the yawning

³ <http://i610.photobucket.com/albums/tt184/Hobbes217/Calvin%20And%20Hobbes/Monopoly.jpg>

chasm between the heights of wealth and the depths of poverty profound, it's important to remember that this is, in many ways, a familiar circumstance we find ourselves in. That the revelation that came to the prophet Muhammad arrived at a time of crisis in Arabia between traditional values of hospitality and family support and a cut-throat market ideology. That the teacher Jesus spoke to his students in a context of imperial domination and exploitation of both people and land. That the story of Moses and the Exodus is grounded in a confrontation between a singular owner – the Pharaoh – and a subjugated class of workers – the Israelites.

Today, the vast and destructive influence over economies has ceased to be the province of emperors and kings. The world we inhabit depends upon private corporations seeking private profits. As long as they do well, everyone else gets to go about their business. Our status remains quo, and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer only incrementally. But when things go really wrong – when a whole bunch of companies lose a whole bunch of money all at once, for instance – the private loss doesn't stay private. See, for example, the 2008 financial crisis. When things start to get better, as we are told they are doing so now, they get better faster for the people who already have more, and slower for the people who already have less.

This is possible because we live in what farmer and poet Wendell Berry calls a “total economy.” This is the way he explains the term:

“A TOTAL ECONOMY is one in which everything—“life forms,” for instance,—or the “right to pollute” is “private property” and has a price and is for sale. In a total economy significant and sometimes critical choices that once

belonged to individuals or communities become the property of corporations... A total economy is an unrestrained taking of profits from the disintegration of nations: communities, households, landscapes, and ecosystems. It licenses symbolic or artificial wealth to “grow” by means of the destruction of the real wealth of all the world...”⁴

The shared resources of our world – the common wealth that rightly cannot be said to belong more to anyone of us than to any others of us – get appropriated and transformed into things that a few people own and most folks do not. The English word “economy,” can be traced back to a Greek word meaning “household management.” So we are managing our household – the collective household of all people and things on this earth – in a manner that makes a few of us rich and many of us poor and that is built on a pattern requiring some sort of self-inflicted disaster every few decades. All the while, everything that is not already a commodity must either be refined into one or destroyed by accident or design.

What is a human being worth, then, in this total economy? Dr. Charles Mayo of the Mayo Clinic once attempted to estimate what the worth of the human body would be if reduced to its essential elements. A librarian at the Mayo Clinic recently refigured the math based on current prices for things like nitrogen and phosphorous. Her estimate came to an even dollar.

But that only considers the physical stuff of our selves; what about our more intangible qualities? For nearly as long as there has been a religious concept of

⁴ <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/299/>

the soul, there have been stories of people attempting to sell theirs. In the German legend of Faust, a scholar sold his soul in exchange for knowledge and pleasure. The landmark blues musician Robert Johnson was said to have traded his soul to the devil in exchange for his preternatural talent with a guitar. And in one particular episode of the Simpsons, the family's eldest child, Bart, sells his soul to his best friend for \$5, reasoning that souls are imaginary things with no value at all, while a five dollar bill is worth five whole dollars.⁵

When Bart's sister Lisa finds out about the exchange, she is incredulous. "How could you do that?...Whether or not the soul is physically real...it's the symbol of everything fine inside us....the only part of you that lasts forever." Bart is unmoved by this, and offers to make Lisa her own bargain if she thinks his prices are too low. "I'll sell you my conscience for \$4.50. I'll throw in my sense of decency too. It's a Bart sales event! Everything about me must go!"⁶

The way we talk about anything's value and worth, in our total economy, is by its cash value, its price tag. Hip-hop super group the Wu-Tang Clan have an acronym for this: cream. C.R.E.A.M.: Cash Rules Everything Around Me. While Method Man, Raekwon and Inspectah Deck were speaking to a specific reality faced in poor, urban communities of color, it describes a much larger predicament that all of us here are in. Money shapes so much of what we can and cannot do. It

⁵ <http://liblog.mayo.edu/2010/01/14/whats-the-body-worth/>

⁶ "Bart Sells His Soul," Season 7, Episode 4.

inserts itself into our most important relationships as a cause of conflict, envy, and resentment. No person and no institution can ignore it completely.⁷

Yet, in such a world as this, the amazing thing is that people still find the courage and creativity to resist such a powerful force and to live their lives in the truth that profit is not the greatest good. To say, “Cash may rule everything around me, but it does not rule me. I determine what purpose sits upon the throne of my heart. I can choose to serve something greater than dollars and cents.” To really follow that intention of a greater purpose requires living against the grain of the world. It means struggle, it means resistance, and anyone and everyone would falter if they tried to do that all by themselves. But when people find a meaning that they can share in, one becomes two, two becomes three, three becomes five and five, given the means and the opportunity to grow, becomes a community. A network of people connected to each other by and for their resistance to the prevailing culture and their determination to work to change it.

Some years ago, the humorist Dave Barry wrote about the spectacular powerlessness of the average consumer in contending with the customer service department of a major corporation. He was able to point to exactly one example of a lowly consumer gaining the advantage over a profitable business. In Russia, not long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, an “electric company got into a billing dispute with a customer and cut off the customer's electricity. This customer, however, happened to be a Russian army arsenal. So the commander ordered a

⁷ The Wu-Tang Clan, “C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)”, Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)

tank to drive over to the electric company's office and aim its gun at the windows. The electricity was turned right back on.”⁸

Barry’s tongue-in-cheek advice to the little guy, whomever they may be, flows from this simple story, and it also serves as the title of my remarks to you this morning: Get a Tank. Let me be clear; I’m not advocating the literal force of arms – though I would not call for a unilateral disarmament either. We should not fall prey to one of our society’s collective errors: being far quicker to condemn children for throwing stones than adult public servants for the aggressive use of tear gas, chokeholds, and bullets. No, when I say, ‘get a tank,’ I mean this:

Alone and unarmored against the unjust distribution wealth, your chances of changing this system we are all enmeshed and implicated in, are poor. What you need is a tank – not built out of steel, but out of people. Out of connections and relationships and the mutually-constructed power that constitutes real community. Not the sense of cheap comfort and low-stakes belonging that we, too often, allow community to serve as a synonym for, but the real stuff. The hard stuff. The grass-roots meaning-making, the collective-accountability, the resilience to face long odds and keep struggling. The determination that drives you on after losing and losing again, that makes you confident enough in yourself to make common-cause with imperfect allies; that makes you confident enough in the wonder and mercy that suffuses the universe to make common-cause with your own imperfect self. The armored vehicle of people who know and love each other working together for the long haul – that’s the kind of tank I’m talking about. Get a tank.

⁸ <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19940502&slug=1908441>

In the hours ahead, I want you to think in these terms: what resources can I put to work towards the fundamental change that our world desperately needs? Who are the co-workers and coalition partners I can engage or enlist with? What lessons or ideas am I going to take home to my family, my workplace, my neighborhood, my congregation, to share and to draw us deeper into lasting, determined relationships that produce collective power. Let's get to work then, friends. The industries which manufacture weapons of empire spend millions of dollars and nearly uncountable hours of human creativity on their construction each week. Let's be at least as determined and committed as they in conceiving our own implements of wholeness and peace.