The Camel and the Needle's Eye

written by Sheila D. Collins | November 20, 2011

> *A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? . . . Jesus said to him, You know the commandments . . . . He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." But when he heard this he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."*
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> (Luke 18: 18-25)

On November 15, 2011, along with an interreligious contingent of clergy and laypeople who had been meeting at Judson Baptist Church in Greenwich Village to discuss how best to support the Occupy movement (providing places for occupiers to sleep was one decision that was taken), my husband and I walked south to Sixth Avenue and Canal St. in lower Manhattan to lend our solidarity to the remnants of those members of the Occupy Wall St. movement who had been brutally evicted from their encampment in Zuccotti Park the night before.

On the corner of Sixth and Canal is a large open site, Duarte Square. Normally, the site is a park that is open to the public 24 hours a day. But now, the park was surrounded by a high board wall, the entrance barred by chain link fences with a sign declaring, "Private Property. No Trespassing." The site is owned by Trinity Wall St. Church and licensed to the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council for a temporary art installation that was ostensibly closed for the season. This 17th century Episcopal church in the heart of the financial district was founded by royal charter in 1697 from King William III. Trinity is reputed to be the largest landowner in lower Manhattan. Its property, totaling in the billions, giving it a lucrative endowment for its charitable foundation, came about as a grant of the "Queen's Farm" by Queen Anne in 1705.

Arriving at the site, we saw hundreds of people gathered in front of the barricade that faces Sixth Avenue. Some were sitting on the ground, others had climbed the fence and were sitting on top, holding large yellow banners and signs that said, "Occupy Wall St." "You destroyed our homes, but you can't destroy our spirit. We are the 99%."Still others were listening to an array of speakers express their outrage at the actions of the police the night before, but with a spirit that indicated, "you have only made us stronger." Flanking the protesters on two sides of the square were hundreds of stoney-faced policemen and women waiting for something to happen. One could see dozens of people looking down from the surrounding office towers.

The protesters had been hopeful that they could move their encampment to Duarte Square. One of them said that they intended to have an interfaith service inside. They had been told that some clergy were even then negotiating with Trinity Church so that this could happen, but as time dragged on they were becoming impatient to find a new home. While waiting for the "something to happen," my husband, who was sitting on a bench, got talking to Jeanie, a woman who had been sleeping in Zuccotti Park for the past month. She was looking weary and still in a state of shock by what she had experienced the night before. She looked to be in her late forties or early fifties.

Dressed in layers of clothing, she carried a torn knapsack on her back bulging with all her belongings. Jeanie told us that she had come here to participate in the Occupation of Zuccotti Park because her mother and aunt are out of work. "Too many people are suffering," she said. She had worked as a financial analyst on Wall Street for 13 years. When asked why she was part of Occupy she replied, "Because of what I have seen by working on Wall Street." She had seen the financial crash of 2008 coming. Now she is putting her knowledge of how the system works to use by conducting research on the financial industry for the movement. She told us that it was Goldman Sachs who had pressured the leaders of Greece and Italy to name bankers to run those countries and bypass the people and that the yield on the London bond market just reached its lowest level since the 19th century. This is absolutely terrifying, she said. This is Jeanie's account of the night of November 15 when the encampment at Zuccotti Park was destroyed.

> *At about 1:30 I was awakened by people shouting, they are coming! This is it! They are going to evict us! Police in full riot gear had surrounded the park and had put up barricades so that people couldn't get out. The police presence was massive, maybe 2,000 police. They tore up our tents, took and threw all our belonging into garbage dumps. I managed to get out of the barricades and tried to get to a nearby mall. The police treated us like the worst kind of terrorists. There were pregnant women in our group. About 200 people were driven out of the park. Then came the violence. Police started pulling the people who were left into the street and then saying, "Now you're in the street (which is closed). You're under arrest." 10-15 police in full riot gear blocked all the exits. The police then began beating them and using mace and pepper spray right in people's eyes.*
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> *By about 3:00 AM most of the occupiers had been dispersed. We were walking uptown, not knowing what to do. The streets were empty and we had nowhere to go. A police helicopter followed our group with searchlights. Police then caught us and arrested many. Those of us who were not arrested walked north to Foley Square near the Federal Court House. Police surrounded us in Foley Square, pushing their billy clubs in front of them and squeezing us into a tight circle. I learned this morning that they had destroyed our library of several thousand books, many on capitalism, socialism, economics, history, cooking, children's stories. They just threw them all into garbage trucks. We talked and talked, had some breakfast and came here [Sixth Ave and Canal Street]. This was the most terrifying night of my life." [Note: some 200 people were arrested that night.]*

We learned from reports the morning after that the carefully planned siege, using police trained in "counterterrorism" tactics, had been kept secret until the last moment from all but a few of the highest ranking officers, that all subway stops surrounding the area had been closed, that Google Maps had been shut off, and the Brooklyn Bridge shut down so that neither supporters from other parts of the city could come to help, as they had done during rumors of an earlier eviction that was called off for fear of its political repercussions, nor could journalists report on what was happening. In his book, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism*, Stephen Graham documents how ever since 9/11 there has been a shift from states-targeting-states to states-targeting-civilians. Around the world there has been a blurring of police and military functions. Cities are being policed with some of the same tactics and strategies used in occupied territories like the West Bank. Western militaries and security forces now perceive all urban terrain as a conflict zone inhabited by lurking "enemies." Helicopters, infrared sensing technology, video surveillance systems, Tasers and pepper spray have become common props in U.S. cities and are increasingly being used against peacefully protesting, unarmed people who have taken to the streets because that is the only way to get the attention of the country's political and economic elites.

Shortly after listening to Jeanie's story, a young man stood up on top of the barricade, asked for a "mic check" and then said that it was time for some of the protesters to enter the site. While I can't quote from him verbatim, he said something like, "Trinity Church is our ally, and if it is our friend, it won't mind our making use of that friendship." There was a reason for the protesters to think that they had a friend in Trinity Church. The church's public statement on the Occupy Movement had said: "Trinity Wall Street respects the rights of citizens to protest peacefully and supports the vigorous engagement of the concerns that form the core of the protests – economic disenfranchisement and failure of public trust." Trinity had opened the doors to Charlotte's Place, its neighborhood center, to protesters who had made use of their meeting room to rest, use the toilets, get warm, catch up on email, or chat with other protesters. Believing they had the church's trust and that a positive answer would be forthcoming from the negotiations with the church, someone announced that the gate was open (apparently it had been opened with a bolt cutter) and a few protesters, perhaps not more than two or three dozen, started climbing over the barricade and surging toward the gate. But as they did so, the police, who far outnumbered the people who had managed to get inside, began to line up in formation. We could see orders being given by the commanders, and soon a squadron of riot-helmeted, baton-wielding police were headed for the inside, with shouts of "Shame! Shame!" and "The Whole World is Watching," arising from the crowd. All eyes, cameras, cell phones and video recorders were then focused on the narrow slots in the wall through which the action inside could be glimpsed. Trying to get a peek through one of these portholes, I could see that the occupiers were simply milling around when the police rushed in, batons at the ready. In one corner, behind some bushes about two dozen policemen bending over someone who was obviously pinned on the ground. "Overkill," I thought to myself.

Shortly thereafter, word came down to the clergy, who were waiting in the square outside the barricade that Trinity Church had said "No," to the occupation of the space. In his internet message to the congregation, the Rev. Dr. James H. Cooper, Trinity's rector, stated in the diversionary way so often used by those in power when they don't dare to state the real reasons they are rejecting the pleas of the powerless that "while Trinity supports the Occupy movement's right to protest peacefully and lawfully, and provides responsible assistance, the parish simply cannot be turned over to a single cause. Trinity welcomes protesters to participate in parish life, but not to occupy parish life in such a way that excludes anyone from taking full part in the vital and dynamic place of faith that is Trinity Wall Street." (Since Occupy Wall Street encampments welcome everyone, his presumption that the Occupiers were exclusionary rang hollow as did his assumption that an empty lot that was several blocks from the church was somehow part of its "parish life.") It was the same kind of diversionary language used by billionaire Mayor Bloomberg when he claimed he had to clear Zuccotti Park to protect the health and safety of the protesters and the neighborhood. All the while his police were affecting the health and safety of the protesters and the neighborhood. Klieg-lights swept the area, helicopters buzzed overhead, loudspeakers roared, police sirens screamed and hundreds of people were violently roused from their sleep, some handcuffed and thrown into police vans, while others were sent away, bewildered and terrified to wander the silent canyons of New York.

When all of the two dozen people who were arrested in the next day's police crackdown at Duarte Square were led away, the crowd began drifting north toward Zuccotti Park. By nightfall of November 15, 2011, the park was again packed with people, the yellow-orange fall foliage above the park giving it a festive air despite the disappearance of the accoutrements of a "community." Gone were the tents that had been ripped apart, the tent poles that had been sawed in pieces, the blankets, pillows and sleeping bags, the boxes of food, the brooms and mops, the laptops that had provided communication with the outside world, the bicycles that had provided power after the mayor had confiscated the generators—all were thrown into a heap and carted off by the sanitation department. But, like a butterfly escaping from a mine, protesters had already managed to replace

about 100 of the 5,000 books that had been carted away from the "people's library," the night before.

The Trinity Church leadership had supported the British in the first Revolutionary War. Over 200 years later, on July 12, 2011, about a dozen people gathered in the churchyard of Trinity Church to mark the 207th anniversary of the death of Alexander Hamilton, first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, founder of the Federalist party, and patron saint of the aristocratic wing of the founding elite. Canon Anne Mallonee, Vicar of Trinity Wall Street, spoke of Hamilton's continued relevance. "His beliefs affect our daily lives to this day," Mallonee said. Therein hangs a tale.

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