

Turning the Tables
John 2:13-22

Last week's sermon on the aftermath of the flood was hard hitting for some. You need to know that I am not picking these scripture readings to aggravate you. These readings are part of the lectionary for Lent. The lectionary, for those of you who may be unfamiliar with the term, is a systematic reading of the Bible. In theory, over three years we should have gone through most of the bible. Most, if not all of the mainline churches use the lectionary: the Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Anglicans etc...So, all over the world, people are hearing this very same scripture reading today.

Let's take this piece of scripture apart for a bit before I comment on it in a more expanded way. *The Passover of the Jews was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. (verse 13).* The gospel of John links Jesus life and passion with the Passover ritual. Jesus is clearly associated in John with the blood of the lamb offered up at Passover. *In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables (verse 14).* Animals were sold in this part of the temple for sacrifice to God in the inner sanctum of the temple as per Judaic custom. Also, people were required to bring money to the temple. The problem was that the money available for day to day commerce was Roman coinage. The problem with Roman coinage is that it had the picture of the Emperor on it. The problem with the Roman Emperor is that he had declared himself to be a god. Bringing such coins into the temple clearly contravened the law against graven images and idolatry. Thus, Jewish people changed their Roman money into Temple money in these outer courts. Unfortunately, as often happens in life, this had become a big business. As it happens to us these modern days with gas prices that are the same no matter what brand of gas we buy, there was price fixing at the moneychanger's tables. They charged exorbitant rates to change over the money, often leaving poor people without the opportunity to offer their gifts to God. This was outrageous to Jesus.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (verses 15, 61) Here, not only is Jesus causing outrage by turning over the tables and protesting the corruption in the Temple, he also does something scandalous. In claiming that the Temple is his "Father's house" he clearly lays a claim to lordship. There is no turning back now on his destiny via the Passion.

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."(verse 17). This is a direct quote from Psalm 69:9, an attempt by the writer of John to explain and sanctify Jesus' actions.

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" (verse 18). It is important to remember that at the time of the writing of John (110 CE – 120 CE) there was an important division happening within the Christian church – a fight between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. It is a family fight, in essence. Thus, when the writer of John states "the Jews" it is more accurate for our understanding of the story to hear it as "the religious leaders." It is an important distinction because the gospel of John has been used for centuries to justify anti-Semitism. This is not what John is about.

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years but you will raise it up in three days?" (verses 19, 20) The temple had been begun by Herod the Great in 10 BCE and was finished by Herod Agrippa in 64 CE.

But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciple remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (versed 21, 22).

Both readings for today curb any tendency to allow Lent to degenerate into a period of self flagellation or efforts at self improvement. Today we are faced by a God of wisdom, a God of power, a God who has ethical demands of us. It is before God that we stand during Lent, not a mirror.¹

The cleansing of the temple is a story that is found in all four gospels. It is obviously a critically important event in the life of Jesus, no matter which evangelist is telling the story. In the first three gospels, those we call the synoptic gospels, (Mark, Matthew and Luke), this story is placed at the end. For them, it is the point of no return for Jesus. For those of you who don't believe politics should be preached from the pulpit, you will need to close your ears and eyes to this pivotal piece of scripture. Once Jesus makes the decision to protest the corruption at the temple and chastises the authorities - his death is a given. The religious and political leaders will no longer tolerate his behavior and his teachings. The Romans, to whom civil order is job one, Jesus is seen as a disruptor, a fomenter – a terrorist. Jesus must go.

Sometimes, being a faithful Christian means taking stands in which one turns tables over. When I was an intern in Wolfville I met a very senior lady who told me the story of her father. Having come to respect her greatly, I had asked her who she admired most in her lifetime. She said her father. He had owned a printing business in Saskatchewan in the pre-Tommy Douglas days. Her Dad, she explained, was a believer in the right of all Canadians to freedom of expression and free speech. So when the communist party asked him to print some tracts he agreed. He was not a communist, in fact, far from it. However, he supported their right to have their publications printed in a country as democratic as Canada. The Saskatchewan government was enraged. A large part of his business involved contracts with the provincial government. They told him that if he printed the tracts, not only would he no longer get any government contracts, but they would make sure he got no contracts from anyone anymore. After some deep soul searching, he printed the tracts. Expecting a happy ending to the story, I was saddened when she told me that the government kept their promise. His printing business folded shortly after that and she remembers times of great deprivation while he tried to find work in other printing outfits. He always worked for someone else after that. She told me, he died a very contented human being nonetheless, sure in his faith and centred in his integrity. He turned the tables and paid the price, like Jesus. The writers of the first three gospels remind us that sometimes being a Christian means standing in the way of the bullets.

¹ Fred B. Craddock et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1993, P. 154-155, (note: I will rely heavily on Fred Craddock's analysis throughout this sermon).

This is not the emphasis, however, that the writer of John places on the story. He is not interested in the causes of Jesus' death. It is immaterial. To him, Jesus clearly chose to lay down his life and then take it up again. The turning of the tables is a theological statement and as such the writer of John places it at the beginning of his gospel. He frames it as a Passover story. It has a focus on the blood and body of Jesus, is connected with his death and resurrection and is associated ultimately with the Passover lamb and our communion feast. The real subject here is Jesus' passion.

It is also a story of a conflict of values – the values that Jesus' holds to be important and those put forward by the religious structures of the day. In the context of the story, the writer indicates that Jesus' followers would not realize what was at stake, but would become enlightened only after the resurrection. Fred Craddock states that:

Jesus speaks "from above" and his auditors hear "from the earth." Jesus speaks what is true and they hear what is apparent. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (verse 19) is met with, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years." (verse 20). Such dialogues constitutes dramatic irony for the reader of the story knows what Jesus' audience does not; that is, that Jesus is speaking of his own passion. Jesus was asked for a sign and he gave the sign, his death and resurrection. The contrast is painfully clear. A temple, but as a witness to God and as a means of drawing persons near to God, is now an object of adoration, an end in itself. It is therefore ripe for destruction. But in the throes of death and in a move toward self-preservation, the temple-keepers will destroy the One in whom God and humankind meet.

It is important to remember the context within which the gospel of John was written. John is the latest of all the gospels. In 66 CE, after a Jewish rebellion, the great Temple in Jerusalem, that centre of worship for all faithful Jews was utterly, completely destroyed by the Roman army. It is said that not even rubble remained. All that is left of it is the retaining wall for the site, which is now known as the "wailing wall" in modern day Jerusalem. What does the devastation of this central mode of worship mean for both Christians and Jews alike for those who survived it? How does one now worship God? For Judaism, the rabbinical movement begins. The gathering of small Jewish communities which are taught by selected, appointed teachers of the law – rabbis. For Christians, the "house church" movement begins. Christians gather in homes large enough to hold big gatherings and holy texts are read from, communion shared and members baptized. For the writer of the gospel of John, composing 35 years or so after the destruction of the Temple, it seems obvious that not only can God be worshipped outside the Temple – but perhaps the problem was that Temple itself and supporting infrastructure had become an object of worship.

This is not some sort of grand hissy fit that Jesus is involved in. It is an outburst of righteous energy against religious leaders and institutions to whom religion had become a business and thus access to God in the Holy of Holies is restricted to the wealthy. This is a story directed to the church. John is not anti-institution, anti-ritual, anti-building or anti-rites. He is however, suspicious of the devotion we give to them, - a devotion that rightly belongs to God and God alone. It is an old evil, slow to die. Sometimes we become so devoted to rituals, places and things that we place our relationship to God in a secondary category, particularly when change to these things appears on the horizon.

Some, like the Pharisees, will even kill if that control is threatened. We must kneel first before God, AND THEN proceed from that perspective to build altars/buildings, frame our liturgies and sing our praises. Anyone of you who has been in a conversation with the bible will understand then that altars, frames and liturgies will change as God's demands upon us change.

Thomas Hawkins says that Jesus is no gentle Jesus, meek and mild.² Jesus comes as a savior bringing grace and love but he is also a judge to those who erect briars between God and human beings. Some congregations use this scripture to explain why they won't have fundraisers in the entry way of the church. But this is a more complex story than that. In the Temple, Jewish worshippers had access to the inner courts; they could approach the Holy of the Holies. Gentile worshippers could only go as far as the outermost courts. This was the same place that the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals had their stalls. It was chaotic, noisy and irreverent. Sincere outside seekers of God were excluded from the very place where God could receive them.

Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is a challenge to all of us in modern day congregations. What barriers to we create for those who are seeking God? Lent is not just a time of individual reflection. It is also a time to look at our corporate sinfulness. How easily, for example, can the physically challenged enter all the areas of our building? What language do we use? In my own life, during these years of ministry I have lately become aware of the peculiar "religious" language I use. How off-putting is that for those who are only beginning to become aware of God's call to them through this church? In what ways does our language or worship exclude some people? Do young Mums with babies feel like they can remain sitting during the hymns? Do seniors with aching hips or knees struggle to do the up and down thing throughout our services? Do people know what to do when they come here for the first time? How do our habits of worship create or inhibit a sacred space of hospitality to outside seekers? Do we have tables within our own institutions that need to be turned?

Finally, what does it mean for us now that the Temple has been destroyed? It means we shouldn't despair when our outer, physical structures deteriorate. For what the early church learned, post resurrection is that Jesus Christ is with us wherever we gather. God is with us in our gatherings whether it is in this service, in our small groups or in our bible studies. Jesus promised it, saying "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also."

Prayer: Gracious God, this is a good community, a good church. Help us to see the ways in which we exclude others. Help us to see the ways in which you call us to change. Give us courage. Give us wisdom. Help us to be guided by you child Jesus, the turner of tables. Amen.

² Thomas R Hawkins, Upper Room Disciplines 1997, (Dean of doctoral programs: Associate Professor of Ministry, McCormick Theological Seminary, and Chicago, Illinois).