

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Scott Trevithick

Date: March 7, 2021 Year B 3rd Sunday in Lent

Text: John 2:13-22 Jesus “cleansing the temple”

Title: Turning Over Tables

Focus: Are we uncomfortable with Jesus turning over the tables? Why did he do it? Is there anything we’re upset about enough to turn over some tables?

Gospel Reading: John 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Recognizing Orderliness

My wife Kendra and I recently saw a scene from the movie *When Harry Met Sally*. Meg Ryan’s Sally is having lunch at a diner with Billy Crystal’s Harry. She places her order with the waitress and wants her salad dressing on the side and everything just so—otherwise, she doesn’t want it at all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxeeeSUFpmE> (A brief clip of about 35 seconds)

My wife told me that sometimes I am like Sally, wanting things to be just so.

I don’t think I’m fussy to this degree. . . . When there is something in a scene in a movie that is an exaggeration of reality in order to make a point, Kendra will say, to explain the contrast, “It’s a movie!”) But I do like to be orderly.

My college buddy Jeff, who was here at Good Shepherd for my installation service 2 years ago and with whom I hiked the Tahoe Rim Trail this past summer, drew attention to my habits as well. After we finished our 10-day trek, we were cooking dinner at the house before Jeff drove back to San Diego the following day. I can’t remember what we were preparing, but Jeff asked me how I wanted the item cut—how thick to make it. He said he didn’t want to cut it one way and then have me redo it or tell him to do it a different way after he’d already done it one way.

Maybe I am fussy.

Are you a “Rule-follower” in that kind of way? Do you have habits like that in which things have to be orderly? I don’t mean to trivialize or make fun of the tendency. In part I’m acknowledging my own tendencies to show that it is something to be aware of and to think about how we make decisions.

We may all be “particular” in one way or another.

Discomfort from the Gospel Texts

Last week we talked about uncomfortable conversations. Jesus was okay talking about the suffering, rejection, and death that he would encounter as Messiah. Gospel writer Mark told us last week that Jesus “said all these things openly.” It was Peter who was uncomfortable (and perhaps other disciples, though they didn’t speak up). As we talked about last week, Peter’s concept or understanding of what it meant to be *Messiah* was probably more like “Conquering Hero” and he couldn’t imagine that Jesus as Messiah would have to suffer and die.

Maybe today it’s our turn to be uncomfortable as we read John’s text from chapter 2 and see Jesus overturn the money changers tables. If we have any “rule follower” or “orderliness” tendencies in ourselves then maybe it makes us uncomfortable to see Jesus have such a dramatic response.

¹⁴In the temple [Jesus] found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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 (John 2:14-15).

Peter was uncomfortable in last week’s reading from Mark 8 because there was no way that his idea of what it meant to be Messiah fit with Jesus’ description of suffering, rejection, and death. If we were to have an idea of Jesus being a bit of a rule follower himself or if we view his actions as primarily dictated by characteristics of gentleness and sensitivity, then seeing Jesus flipping over these tables would, at the very least, be unsettling. We might have a picture of Jesus as “meek and mild” from a poem or song that we learned in Sunday School and that wouldn’t fit with this picture of Jesus here in this story.

There are multiple gospel stories in which we see Jesus’ gentleness and compassion. He demonstrated genuine sympathy and sensitivity to human need and he directly addressed and alleviated the need he saw. These accurate portrayals of Jesus could lead us to conclude that Jesus was fully mild-mannered and non-confrontational all the time. If so, then seeing Jesus’ bold action here with the money changers would certainly be striking and perhaps alarming. Like last week’s reading of Peter’s rebuking Jesus because what he said about suffering, rejection, and death don’t fit Peter’s picture, seeing a demonstrative Jesus flip over the tables could be too much for us to absorb; it doesn’t make sense.

Jesus Reacts Strongly, but His Explanation is Limited

I think part of what makes the passage challenging to understand, in addition to it confronting us with any expectations we may have of a mild-mannered Jesus, is that he

doesn't really say a lot in explanation, which may leave observers as well as us as readers a bit puzzled to determine the reason for such a strong reaction. There's really only one line of explanation from Jesus, hardly a full discourse:

¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

The teaching is more in the action than in the explanation. Jesus is showing more than explicitly telling.

Temple Practices

Let's talk a bit about the setting and what would have been customary in the temple. John sets this passage at the time of the Passover. It was a major festival for which people would have traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate.

Passover is the holiest of the pilgrimage feasts to which Jews would come to make sacrifices at the temple.¹ There are estimates that the population of Jerusalem would swell from 50,000 to 180,000 for Passover.² The strain on local resources to house and feed that number of people would be enormous. The crowding at the temple would be near gridlock.

Among the practices or customs for Passover:

- Unblemished animals were required for sacrifice.
- If a person was traveling great distances, then the long journey would make it hard for an animal to remain unblemished.
- This led to the practice of locals providing animals for purchase.
- Another practice was the exchange of coins so the temple tax could be paid in the suitable coinage.

That the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover likely tripled the usual population gives an indication of the economic opportunity the merchants would have identified. The overwhelming number of people in this place and the demand for services, including selling of animals for sacrifice and exchange of coins created incentive to exploit the system for economic gain.

Jesus Protests. . . (what?)

As I said a moment ago, Jesus is brief with his explanation—only telling the people selling the doves, "Take those things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (v. 16).

¹ See Sermon Writer commentary.

² As noted by Wes Howard-Brook. *Becoming the Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship*, p. 83 (New York: Maryknoll, 1994).

So, based on what we observe and what Jesus says, why do you think Jesus responds as he does? Why does he take such forceful action? What implications could we identify that are consistent with the text?

Some observations:

- His righteous anger is not directed at the Pharisees or Sadducees or Romans, but at those profiting from people encountering God.
- Is there economic exploitation as a factor? The cost of the sacrificial doves and animals was too high and exploited those seeking grace.³
- He is angry about this unnecessary barrier that kept people from worshipping God.
- Jesus drives the sheep and cattle out, but not the people- they are allowed to remain in the temple. Cleansing the temple does not mean driving out the people- even the unfaithful exploiters- it means removing their means of exploitation.
- Jesus is angry about worship and who and what we place in first importance: Jesus drives the animals out from the prayer space where they were being held and sold. That space was for prayer and was being used for commerce instead. The pairing of today's gospel story with the 10 Commandments is a caution which draws our attention to what we place first in our lives.

What Jesus' action is and what it's not. . .

As we pay attention to Jesus' actions, let's also identify what's *not* happening:

Jesus's action is bold or aggressive and dramatic, but it's also not violent:

- No one is physically hurt.
- The animals are driven out. This story is told in all 4 gospels. John alone uses the term *whip of cords*, which may sound harsh as it's translated, but the term in Greek also suggests a rope made of rushes—they'd be like woven grasses. It would be common to what any shepherd or cattle herder would use with oxen and sheep, animals with thick hides.
- The tables are overturned.
- The coins go flying ("poured out" says the NRSV).
- The commerce or the emporium (the Greek word is *emporion*)⁴ is upset, overturned, but no one is harmed.
- But no one is physically harmed.

³ On the other hand, John doesn't include the phrase "Den of Robbers" that each of the other gospel writers does. While economic exploitation may be a concern of John's, he doesn't highlight it.

⁴ ἐμπόριον. Transliteration: *emporion*, (em-por'-ee-on). Definition: a trading place. Usage: a place of traffic, mart, market, market-house.

What's Worthy Getting this Angry about?

In the opening video clip from the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, I admitted that I have a tendency toward being orderly. If you find you have the same inclination, then some self-reflection questions seem fitting:

- When is orderliness for the sake of order alone? When does that desire for order need to be challenged so that we can see what's under the surface?
- Are we overly concerned about orderliness or are we upset enough about tables being literally or metaphorically turned over that we might miss any underlying injustice or distortion?
- Who are examples or courageous people in public life who speak with a prophetic voice? Who are people who have disrupted order not to be disruptive, but to call attention to the reality of what's underneath the surface—to say that things need to change?

For instance, I've got a preacher friend who has said some people in the congregation he serves “got really mad when [they said] I talked too much about racial justice and sacrificial love in my sermons.”

He had a different view of his role as preacher; his view was, “Hey, if protecting the congregation from a respiratory virus that kills people and speaking the truth about sins drives people away, then [shrugs his shoulders], oh well.”⁵

- A significant final question to ask ourselves: “Is there anything we're rightfully upset/angry about enough to turn over some tables?” Meaning, by extension, that “turning over tables” can be an act of faith.

A Closing Vignette

The Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity is the artist from *Sanctified Art* who created the work *Overtun*, which is a piece reflecting on this story in John. The artwork and this written reflection are presented in the Lenten Devotional Booklets.

In 1965, my grandfather moved his family of six to Birmingham, AL, to become the new senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church. Situated downtown, First Pres sits only a few blocks away from 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of the 1963 bombing attack by white supremacists who killed four young girls. Earlier that same year, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed eight prominent white clergy in his now famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” My grandfather's predecessor was one of those clergy. They prompted King's famous letter by requesting he appeal to law and order. In essence they said to him: “*We agree with your movement, but your methods are too harsh. The demonstrations are destructive and causing too much backlash. You're bringing agitators into our city. Wait for a better time and negotiate gently.*”

⁵ Robert Brown on the PCUSA Leaders Facebook page, posted March 6, 2021.

This is the context in which my grandfather began his ministry with First Pres. While he helped the church change their policy to become open to worshipers of all races (a process that undoubtedly required much moral fortitude), I wonder how often he, too, felt the urge of his predecessor and the other white clergy who had written to Dr. King. I wonder how often he preferred for justice to happen slowly, gently, and in an orderly manner. I think often about how that urge lives in me too.

Closing

It's not easy being a preacher. It's not easy being a follower of Jesus. By grace, may God grant us the wisdom and courage to follow, even when we are uncomfortable.

