

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: March 3, 2024, Year B, 3rd Sunday in Lent

Text: John 2:13-22

Title: Would You Flip Over a Table?

Focus: Depending on your picture of who Jesus is, is it uncomfortable or upsetting to see him angry enough to overturn tables and drive animals out of the temple area? What was at stake in John 2 that Jesus was upset about or protesting? What do you feel strongly enough about that you would overturn a table?

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.

What Does Scripture Do?

- **What is the impact of scripture or of a particular passage?**

Would you be willing to agree that, over time and through different passages, scripture should:

- Teach and instruct,
- Inspire or provide hope,
- Comfort or reassure,
- Challenge or admonish?

I would say yes to all of that. And also say that any given passage may have different impacts and may have different impacts on us at different times. As we read and reflect on a particular passage over time, the impact that it can have will differ due to our changing circumstances or settings. At different times, different parts of the passage may stick out to us—may draw our attention—and have an impact on us.

What Picture Do You Have of Jesus?

Here's the question or the thing that sticks out that I want to pick up today: One of the things that we talked about last week was that seeing Peter rebuke Jesus likely makes us uncomfortable.

We asked, "Why did Peter feel the need to rebuke Jesus?" And we talked about the differing ideas they had about what it meant to be messiah.

- **There is something in this passage that I think makes us uncomfortable.**

I wonder if you recall being in a Sunday school classroom in your childhood and seeing a picture on the wall with Jesus surrounded by cute little lambs or maybe even carrying one on his shoulders. Maybe that's an image you have in your head of Jesus seeking out the lost sheep.

That visual image is totally a scriptural one. Recall that Jesus told the parable about the shepherd who has 100 sheep. When one is lost, he leaves the 99 and goes in search of the one which is lost (Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7).

And recall that Jesus said, **'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep** (John 10:11).

But remember how I prompted you with a question at the beginning of the sermon? It was, **"What's the function of scripture?"** At different times and through different passages, would you agree that it is to challenge, inspire, comfort, reassure, and teach?

The picture of Jesus, as a caring and compassionate one who reaches out to us, is surely deeply embedded in scripture. At the same time, if that's our only picture of Jesus, then we're missing other essential parts of who Jesus is.

If that picture of Jesus holding the cute little lamb on his shoulders is our only or our dominant picture of Jesus, then I think we're going to be uncomfortable with seeing in this passage that Jesus came into the temple and drove out the animals and overturned the money changers' tables (v. 15).

The accurate, though incomplete, portrayal of Jesus as gentle and compassionate 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 Jesus said about suffering, rejection, and death don't fit Peter's picture of messiah, seeing a demonstrative Jesus flip over the tables could be too much for us to absorb; it doesn't make sense.

- **Does it make you uncomfortable to see Jesus that angry?**

And just as we asked last week, “Why did Peter feel the need to rebuke Jesus?,” we need to dig a little deeper to understand why Jesus reacted as he did and what was going on that caused him to do that.

Jesus is Angry about . . . ?

What’s Jesus angry about? What’s at stake? To figure that out a bit, we need to understand the setting a little better.

The system of offerings in this first century in the temple:

- The Passover Festival was the holiest of feasts. People would come from all over and **travel to the city of Jerusalem**. There are estimates that the population of Jerusalem would swell from 50,000 to 180,000 for Passover.¹ Many people would have to travel great distances to be there.
- **To make an offering:** You might bring an animal from your own flocks or purchase one from your neighbor. Since an offering animal should be unblemished, bringing an animal from one’s home risked something happening to it on the way. So many chose to sell their own animal, bring the money with them, and then purchase a replacement in Jerusalem.
- **The role of the priests:** the priests who examine the animals (which are supposed to be “perfect”), may deem yours unacceptable.—that was the risk you took in bringing your own animal great distance and explained why this system was necessary.
- **The money changers** were there to **convert various currencies** for the temple tax: This tax must be paid in Jewish coin, because Roman coins have images of emperors or gods, and are therefore not permitted.

Summary: Both the selling of animals for sacrifices and the payment of the temple tax were activities required by Jewish law and central to the temple’s functions.

So, if the behavior of the buyers and the sellers is both normal and necessary, what is Jesus so upset about? Jesus is brief in what he says—only telling the people selling the doves, “Take those things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (v. 16).

- Because it’s likely that those who are selling and exchanging are in cahoots with corrupt priests.
- It was a system which enriched and benefited some at the expense of others: If you want to keep your religious commitment, you need to buy an animal from a merchant inside the temple grounds. Those merchants charge more than what the animal is worth, and likely give a kickback to the priests.

¹ As noted by Wes Howard-Brook. *Becoming the Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship*, p. 83 (New York: Maryknoll, 1994).

- In a similar way, the money changers can charge pretty much any exchange rate they want because they have a monopoly on the business.
- Jesus 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.

It's not just people selling stuff on temple grounds. It's not just currency exchanges. It's the greed. It's greed masquerading as something holy. Merchants and priests alike are taking advantage of all worshipers, but especially the poor who can least afford it. You go to pray, and you are required to spend a lot of money to do so, to be acceptable to God with your sacrifice.

Though the sellers of the animals for the sake of offering and worship were necessary, what has become more important than animals for offering was the profit they were making. Money has become more important than providing the means to make an offering.

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*)² is upset, overturned, but no one is harmed; no one is physically harmed.

Would You Flip Over a Table?

Do you have that picture in your head of Jesus with the lamb around his shoulders? A line of scripture, repeated many times, which comes to me is that "God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."³

² ἐμπόριον. Transliteration: *emporion*, (em-por'-ee-on). Definition: a trading place. Usage: a place of traffic, mart, market, market-house.

³ See, for instance, Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, Ps. 103:8, Ps. 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2.

These are true pictures of who Jesus is and maybe it's hard to see Jesus get angry and to express it in this way.

- But maybe the response and the rationale behind it is not so much **getting angry**, but it's about **standing up as an advocate** for those who are victims of greed and exploitation. And I can totally see Jesus taking that role.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

When evil [people] plot, good [people] must plan. When evil [people] burn and bomb, good [people] must build and bind. When evil [people] shout ugly words of hatred, good [people] must commit themselves to the glories of love."

Dr. King's quote urges us that it's not enough to sit back, offering tacit approval, but no tangible support. Destructive forces—call it evil if you like—are at work--greed, for instance, to fill one's pocket and not caring that that comes at the expense of others. We have a responsibility to take action rather than sit back.

That leads me to the question posed by the sermon title: **Would You Flip Over a Table?** Is there something that you'd be willing to be angry enough about that you would, metaphorically speaking, flip over a table or drive out the means of exploitation as a response or as a form of protest?

Metaphorically, speaking, what would you be willing to overturn some tables or take a bold step for justice or be a determined advocate as an expression of a desire for justice, as a way of extending kindness, or to create opportunity or to advocate for someone who is an outsider or on the margins?

Faithful Responses from our "21st Century Disciples" Class

Last Sunday in Shepherd Hall at about 10 a.m. between services, we didn't flip over any tables, but we heard from two leaders who are serving faithfully and advocating for people in need. This is an on-going class coordinated by Erik Schoen and some others connected to our Endowment Team which invites leaders from organizations who have received a grant from our endowment to come and meet with Good Shepherd folks between worship services.

I liked the personal, conversational approach with Erik's insightful questions. The most direct and compelling:

- **Tell us about your choice to make the work you are doing a primary focus of your lives.**

Korine Viehweg, Executive Director, RAVE Family Foundation

RAVE is an acronym for Respite And Volunteer Experiences. RAVE offers "The gift of time to caregivers by offering respite sessions to families caring for young and adult children and with special needs. We are allowing a reprieve that strengthens the

quality of care parents and guardians deliver. With time to disconnect, relax, unwind, or enjoy activities not typically available to families caring for a child with special needs, caregivers can return to their crucial role for these children with less stress and a renewed spirit.

Korinne talked about . . .

She did not expect to become a nonprofit ED—she was happy with her life as it was but found the people and the work so compelling that she was drawn into it.

She talked about relating to the exceptional needs of the families RAVE serves—she expressed some concern that she could fully relate: She herself is a mother, but not a mother of a special needs kid. Her own child has needed an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), which is common among special needs kids.

Christina, ED from Down Syndrome Network of Northern Nevada⁴

I am incredibly humbled and honored to work for the Down Syndrome Network of Northern Nevada as the Executive Director. I was first introduced to DSNNN after my nephew Sebastian was born in 2016. Prenatal bloodwork confirmed that Sebastian would have Down syndrome, and from that moment on, I committed myself to being a support for my sister and advocate for my nephew. I began volunteering on the Buddy Walk Committee in 2019 and joined the Board of Directors the following year. Working with so many amazing individuals with Down syndrome, as well as their friends and family, has inspired me to commit so much more than I ever imagined to this wonderful organization. I served on the Executive Board as the Secretary for one year, and when the Executive Director position became available, things just fell into place. I love using my experience and contacts to help our organization achieve its fullest potential. With a background in radio advertising and hospitality management, I have a diverse skillset that ranges from problem solving to event and promotion planning. My three-year-old son Jaco comes to work with me every day, and it brings so much joy to my heart that he is growing up in an environment built around inclusion and love.

Each of them talked about how hard that work is and yet how rewarding it is I heard the passion in their voices. They are deeply drawn to this work, and their passion is compelling. I did not pick up anger from either of them, but I picked up passion and conviction and fierce advocacy as they seek to support individuals and families.

What's a Faithful Response (to injustice, for instance)?

Jesus turned over a table and drove the animals out as a response to greed and exploitation. It's a startling response.

⁴ Biographical information from the organization website: <https://www.dsnnn.org/about-5>

There is also no indication in the text, that flipping over tables was a regular habit of Jesus. It's not as though he did this every week or every time he entered a new town. I think he was always looking out for the outsider or the oppressed and for ways to address injustice, but it wasn't as though flipping over tables was his customary practice.

Turning over tables sounds so radical. It is bold. That example of confronting injustice and caring for the outsider or person on the margins is our guide.

I think of Korrine and Christina who spoke last week. What was so compelling was the passion in their voices. This brought them joy. This passionate calling provided meaning and purpose and a connection to community. I told Erik later that I heard that or was listening to that as a pastor, and also as a parent. I want my young adult kids to discover something meaningful like that in their lives.

One last example of passion and joy in responding to God's call:

In this week's New Member Orientation class, we watched Vera Claar on a video clip.⁵ At age 91, she had deep joy in her life despite being physically limited by health concerns. As she talks about sock dolls: "It's just such a joy to make them. A lot of love goes into them. I try to visualize a child getting that and making them happy or comfortable. It blesses my heart. Now that I have this task done, I'm waiting for my next task. I believe that it is all him. . . I ask God to keep giving me tasks until I take my last breath. I do want to honor him, and I do want to help the people God does love. That's very important to me--mainly because of all that God has given me, which I could never, ever, ever repay."

So, the sermon title, "Would you flip over a table?" is meant to prompt us to think of ways we confront injustice or be an advocate rather than suggest we should be flipping over tables in anger all the time. May we find the joy that comes from responding to God's call.

⁵ I recorded a conversation with LCGS member Vera Claar in the fall of 2021 and showed it in worship Dec. 12, 2021. The worship recording is available on the LCGS YouTube channel.