

Turning the Tables  
John 2:13-22  
March 7, 2021  
Third Sunday in Lent

What makes you angry? Someone cutting you off when you are trying to merge onto the freeway? Rude people? Property Taxes? Loud neighbors? Barking dogs? People who don't keep their commitments? Cantankerous politicians? There are lots of possibilities. There are no lack of things in the world that push our buttons, especially during these stressful days of covid.

In today's reading, Jesus walked into the Temple in Jerusalem and saw that something was not right. It is the most prolific story of Jesus becoming angry. That doesn't mean there weren't other occasions. Jesus was angry and assertive, and with good reason. His disruption that day in the temple was a powerful sign of his discontent with the way things were.

If you have heard this story before, you may think of it as coming near the end of Jesus' life, after he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. It's a confrontation that gave the authorities the evidence they needed to trap Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth was a troublemaker, they said.

It is interesting that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke this event comes at the end of their gospels. Jesus' outburst in the temple was one of the last straws that led to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. But in John's Gospel, the story comes much earlier -- in chapter 2. It is not near the end but very near the beginning.

So what's going on here? Did Jesus chase the moneychangers more than once? Did it set a tone for his ministry? Watch out! Here comes that troublemaker from Nazareth again. Grab the cash box! Move the animals out of the way!

I think all four Gospel writers knew the same story, but John saw it in a different way, as John often does compared to the other writers. For John, Jesus' actions in the temple pointed to the heart of who Jesus was and what he had come to do. It had to come at the beginning, not at the end.

There are two stories in this chapter. The first story is Jesus' miracle at the wedding in Cana. His first miracle. They ran out of wine at the wedding, and Jesus told the steward to fill six stone jars with water. Then he told the steward to taste the water. The water had been turned to wine! Amazing!

That story is more than wishing Jesus would come to our parties. John tells us a particular detail that we sometimes miss in our fascination with the wine: The

stone jars were used for the rites of purification. Jesus turns the purification water into wine. The religious authorities of the day would not be happy with this act either. By the time of Jesus, an elaborate system of purification rituals had been developed. Some things were considered pure and others impure, some things were clean and others were unclean.

For example, women were impure seven days after the birth of a son, or fourteen days after the birth of a daughter. Don't ask why the difference, I don't know! Dead bodies were impure. People with blemishes such as leprosy were impure. Certain foods were impure or considered unclean.

The list had gotten very, very long. Jesus challenged this vast purity system. It was a system that had profound implications for all of life. Jesus taught there would no longer be strict divisions, for example, between male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

Changing water into wine was not so much about a great party and popularity as it was a way of breaking down barriers. It was a radical new way of seeing the world and God's presence in it. It was also no accident that the miracle at Cana was the first sign Jesus performed in the Gospel of John.

Jesus changed the water into wine; he changed the world, and his teachings continue to change us today. The stage was set. It was also no accident that the next action takes place in the temple, for the temple was at the heart of the purity system.

These stories are connected. The animals being sold there are for sacrificial purposes. These animals were required for sacrifice as a way for the faithful to purify themselves and be justified before God. If you were coming into God's presence, you needed to offer a sacrifice that was pure . . . a *good* animal, an animal without blemish. So you're traveling to Jerusalem during Passover. But it is too far to bring your own goat or lamb. So you buy one at the temple when you get there. Bob, are there any goats or lambs for sale in our sanctuary today? No? I didn't think so!

Now the temple does not take your ATM card. In fact, they won't even take your money because it has a picture of Caesar on it. It is impure, dirty money. But you are in luck. There are moneychangers sitting there and they will take your money and for a service charge, and give you temple tokens that are pure. Think of it as exchanging your money for foreign currency in another country. And you thought your bank was the first to slap you with a service charge and other fees!

So some moneychangers became greedy and took advantage of the poor and those traveling long distances to come to the temple. Remember Jesus was deeply Jewish, and committed to teaching in the synagogue. He was not the first Jew to cry out against abuses in the temple. Centuries before Jesus, the prophet Micah asked,

*"Will God be pleased with thousands of rams, with 10,000 rivers of oil?... God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*

Nothing about sacrifices there. Jesus' life and ministry challenged the rules and turned the tables that labeled people and things as pure or impure. Jesus turned the tables in the temple and began to change the way people drew closer to God.

The temple was the main place where the Jews believed God was found – a holy place where you make sacrifices. Jesus points to a new reality. “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up!” “Ridiculous” the people thought. It took 46 years for build this temple! What is he talking about?

Well, Jesus was speaking of himself as the new temple, and we as his followers are the living body of Christ. This is a major statement about Jesus. God said, “This is my Chosen One in whom I am well pleased!” I don’t think we can fully appreciate today how radical and life altering Jesus was in his day. We tend to water him down.

What we have here is no longer a building, but a body – the body of Christ that is the new temple. We have a clear demarcation between the old Jewish religious customs, and the new astonishing teachings that Jesus offered. You can begin to see how there was bound to be a major collision between the new values and the old. God was no longer distant and remote, to be appeased by sacrifice and outdated rituals, but was a dynamic presence for every believer.

The final straw was when Jesus turned the tables upside down, setting the livestock loose and spilling the money all over the floor. His was righteous anger – not a personal vendetta. Most of the time when we get angry, it is because of what we perceive to be a personal affront or the result of a disagreement. We’re likely to get angry if we get stuck in traffic, or if we miss an episode of our favorite show. But Jesus got angry on behalf of God and what it means to worship in truth and spirit. It was righteous indignation.

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I don’t know what makes you angry, but I know what should. What about continued racial profiling, and racial injustice that continues in our country? What about continued practices of redlining that prevents black people from

living where they choose, or are unable to get a loan at the bank? What about women who still get paid less than a man for doing the same job? Or covid vaccines not being distributed to the underserved? Are we angry that there continues to be a large homeless population in our country and right here in San Rafael? Or that people can't buy food or pay rent because they have lost their jobs? And what about politicians who care more about their own egos and positions than serving their constituents? Do we get angry because people and corporations continue to pollute the planet and global warming may be irreversible? Are we angry about the growing gap between the rich and the poor?

I don't know if you've ever looked at it this way before, but Lent is the perfect time to get angry enough to turn over old tables and set up the new. What new tables will you set up? Jesus overturned not only the tables in the temple, but in your life and mine. It is something to think about if you ever find yourself in the temple. Amen

John 2:13-22

2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

2:14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

2:15 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.

2:16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

2:17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

2:18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

2:20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

2:21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

2:22 After 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.