

# Turning the Tables

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John 2:13-22

Exodus 20:1-20

This story of angry Jesus turning over the tables in the temple is one we sometimes think of or joke about when we open our wallets on Sunday morning, for something other than the offering. Here at Hyattsville Mennonite on any given Sunday you might find people selling Girl Scout cookies, CDs, duct tape wallets, hand knit scarves or tickets to the next fundraising event. This kind of “selling in the temple” is not what made Jesus snap that day.

Jesus turning the tables in the temple is an important event: it appears in all four gospels. For John, this event is the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is the beginning of the end. In the synoptic gospels this scene in the temple is what finally gets Jesus in so much trouble he is arrested soon after.

The lectionary today gives us John’s more detailed version of the incident. It is nearly Passover and John tells us that Jesus goes up to Jerusalem. Everyone is going up to Jerusalem, Passover is approaching and observant Jews go to the temple to make their sacrifice. This is a routine worship ritual. In Luke, we read that eight days after Jesus was born his parents took him to the temple. A purification ritual was necessary after a woman gave birth. Jesus’ parents offered a pair of doves as a sacrifice. The customary sacrifice after the birth of a child would have been a sheep, but Jesus’ family couldn’t afford that so the pair of doves was an acceptable alternative.

Now it is some 30 years later, and Jesus himself is going to the temple. Is he prepared to purchase and offer a sacrifice for Passover?

What he sees as he enters the temple courtyard enrages him. And the scene he creates is so memorable that artists have been depicting it ever since. This is not the baby Jesus of Christmas carols, beatifically smiling and cooing, “no crying he makes.” This is the adult Jesus who sees injustice and raises a ruckus. He can’t take it any more.

As Jesus enters the temple courtyard, he sees the cattle, sheep and doves for sale. This is customary; many of the people are coming a long distance to the temple to observe Passover. They are not expected to bring their own livestock with them for sacrifice. It is a service that the temple provides, having these animals that have been pre-approved by the priests, available for purchase.

But it is not only the livestock that enrages Jesus, maybe not even primarily the animals. It is merchants; it is moneychangers. You see, the faithful not only travel a long distance to get to the temple in Jerusalem. Before they can purchase the sacrificial animal they must change their Roman money into temple currency. Roman currency has the picture of Caesar’s head on it. “No graven images,” no idols, certainly not in the temple. Every Jew knows that commandment. The Roman money is unclean for use in the temple. So for a “small fee” the faithful could change their unclean money into clean currency enabling them to purchase the approved sacrificial animals.

The costs are not insignificant. Bringing your own pair of doves costs you two days' wages. The temple tax, the inspector's fee and the money changer's fee add up to another 3½ days' wages. If you are so unfortunate as to bring your own doves and they are not approved for sacrifice by the inspector, then you can buy the doves offered at the temple, equivalent to 40 days wages.

You begin to see that Jesus wasn't just objecting to someone selling cookies in the back of the sanctuary. This is an issue of justice. A few people, the priestly families who run the temple, are making a massive fortune off the religious obligations of their poor cousins. This is a system of terrible injustice all cloaked in the name of doing the right thing before God.

And so Jesus' response to seeing this, perhaps for the thirtieth Passover in his life, was one of outrage. He finds ropes, perhaps those that have been used for tying up the animals, and quickly turns them into a whip of sorts. He drives the animals out, he dumps the tables of the money changers, leaving them to scramble for their precious coins, and orders the rest of the animal sellers to take their livestock and get out!

Jesus is not an outsider looking at an unjust system. Jesus is an insider, a poor Jew himself. He knows what this system costs his people, their pockets and their souls, and he is seething with rage. *No more separating God's people from their God. This is Passover, celebrating when God led the people out of bondage.* And now the people are bound by strict adherence to the rules and commandments that were given to help them experience freedom. The irony of it all.

As Jesus' disciples remember the incident later, they realize it is just like that verse from Psalm 69, "Zeal for your house will consume me." Jesus' zeal shows plainly that the house of God was no longer a place for all to worship, but only for those who could pay the entrance fee.

Sadly, access to worship is not only a historical problem; it is contemporary as well. I have read numerous articles this week by Catholic women about a situation in Brazil. These women are turning over the tables in the blogosphere. The archbishop of Brazil says that a young mother has excommunicated herself because she took her 9-year-old daughter for a legal abortion. This little girl had a stomachache. In taking her to the doctor, it was discovered she was pregnant with twins. The 80-pound child was no candidate for carrying the pregnancy to term; it would have endangered her life and the lives of the babies. The doctors recommended and carried out an abortion.

When the Catholic Church found out about this, the archbishop declared that the mother and the doctors had excommunicated themselves. No word on what ecclesial punishment will be given the stepfather, (and father in this case as well) who for several years had been sexually abusing this girl and her older sister.

This is a tragic situation in so many, many ways. Abortion is not a good thing. Neither is abuse of a child. But what should the church offer in a situation such as this? A courtyard of money changers and sacrificial animals at over inflated prices? Who, what is really being sacrificed here?

Mary Hunt writes in an article:

*And then the Vatican joined the chorus. Cardinal Giovanni Batista Re, Prefect for the Congregation of Bishops, surprised at the outcry against the local church, defended his brother bishop ... In Roman Catholicism, according to these men, the law rules; letter over spirit, teachings over persons. One could ignore it, write it off as meaningless, except it's hard to pass over the harm done to the people involved. They have suffered enough. They don't deserve it. No one deserves it.*

The care, compassion and counseling that this family needs has been denied them. In the desire to keep the church clean and strictly adhering to the rules and doctrine, a family has been wounded and cut off from the very church body that it needs.

Of course Jews and Catholics are not the only transgressors in issues of justice and doctrine. The roots of this very congregation come out of some young adults turning the tables, in a very gentle Mennonite way. In the early 1950s, the only Mennonite church in the Washington area was a congregation that was a member of the Lancaster Conference. The requirements for plain dress and the distinct roles for men and women were all part of what was called "the discipline" expected of all conference churches and thus church members. To go against the "discipline" was to exclude oneself from the congregation.

Many Mennonite young men, through their conscientious objection to war and subsequent alternative service during the 1940s, experienced the novelty of relating to Christians that were not Mennonite or who were Mennonites of a different stripe. They discovered that their worship together could be genuine,

their fellowship spirit filled. The Washington locals, upon returning to their home congregation, discovered that their new brothers and sisters in Christ were not welcome because of their dress or their jewelry. These followers of Jesus decided to turn the tables.

They were not ready to give up on church. They needed the church; they desired fellowship and discipleship. But the rules, the doctrine designed to bring them closer to God and the church, had become an impediment. Thus the Georgetown Mennonite Church (later known as Woodridge Mennonite and now Hyattsville Mennonite) emerged, meeting in the upstairs of a coffee shop on Prospect Street in Georgetown.

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But the story doesn't stop with Jesus' anger and disruption. When asked for an explanation of what he could possibly be thinking by disturbing and halting temple worship for the day, Jesus explains that the temple is not the end all and be all. Destroy the temple? I will raise it up again in three days.

What an absurd statement; it makes no sense to his listeners. But when the writer of John looks back on this event, it is plain that Jesus was really talking about his own body as the temple, about his death and resurrection.

Jesus' resurrection and this new understanding of the temple bring new freedom. It is not that the rules are no longer important. We still pay attention to the Ten Commandments, to the Sermon on the Mount, to the confessions of faith. But we are not dependent on the temple as a place to offer sacrifice. Jesus' followers understand his body as the new temple. As the body of Christ we are

the temple. (And Paul takes it one step further, telling us that *each* of our bodies is a temple of the Holy Spirit. (I Cor. 6: 19))

Though the gospel of John shows Jesus, beginning his ministry by turning over the tables of injustice, the church often turns its head to injustice. In Mennonite Church USA right now, those who dare to speak that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are included in the body of Christ are accused of turning over the tables. More than that, we are accused of tearing apart the body of Christ, destroying this fragile church unity that was built less than a decade ago on the fear of LGBT people.

Though the prophets have spoken of doing justice for millennia, though doing justice is essential to followers of Jesus, we see that throughout our faith story justice has torn the church apart and it may do so again. For some reason institutions and those in power are often more concerned with self-preservation, with rules and doctrine than justice. The inclusion of all God's children in the body of Christ is a matter of justice.

Lest we feel guilty about standing for justice because we are told we are destroying the temple, remember again the end of the story. Jesus knew that destruction of the temple was not the end. Though the temple as we know it may be destroyed — the new temple, the Body of Christ, will rise to new life. Resurrection is coming and we will be witnesses to it.