

**“Turning over Tables“**

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**John 2:13-22**

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

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

**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.

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

**17** His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

**18** The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

**19** Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” **20** The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?”

**21** But he was speaking of the temple of his body. **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.

**JUDGMENT JESUS**

If you like your Jesus to be meek and mild, don’t read the gospel of John!

John puts the cleaning of the Temple at the beginning of his gospel because he wants us to see Jesus in a different light.

John’s Jesus doesn’t put up with any nonsense.

This Jesus speaks truth to power.  
 This Jesus turns over tables.  
 This Jesus makes a whip of cords.

I wonder.  
 How did the people respond to what Jesus did?

I suspect some liked it very much.  
 It's easy to get all pumped up by a Messiah who takes on injustice.

Jesus said, "You're running the Temple like Wal-Mart. Get this stuff out of here!"

(Well, he would have said that if they had Wal-Mart back then.)

I get a little fiery too when I hear about churches  
 that run like a corporation rather than a community of faith.

I get a little fiery too when pastors use their position to promote politicians  
 instead of the Savior.

I get a little fiery too when the bottom line  
 becomes more important than the potential for ministry.

So, I can get into John's Jesus.  
 I like my Jesus with a little fire.

Let's put God back into Passover,  
 and resurrection back into Easter.  
 No more chocolate bunnies.

Crack that whip Jesus.  
 I'm on your side!

You see, the gospel of John can be fun!  
 All you have to do is identify the religious hypocrites in our time, and the sermon practically writes itself.

WHIPPING PEOPLE INTO SHAPE?

I thought about reenacting Jesus' use of the whip  
 and

make it into a children's sermon!  
Wouldn't that be fun?

And then I thought, "Maybe not."

I could foresee disaster in trying that object lesson.

The children and the people on front pews would be in danger if I tried that object lesson

But, more importantly, it would teach the children the wrong lesson.

Has Jesus has really called me to "whip" people into shape?

Is it my job to judge others in the name of Christ?

Is it my job to turn over tables and play the role of a prophet?

Is it my job to drive people out of the Temple  
because their motives are not pure?

We've talked about this before.

How we interpret a passage depends upon the person we identify with in the story.

And usually we identify with Jesus.

That makes sense.

Jesus wears the white hat.

We want to be on his side.

But, we forget.

This is a job that is above our pay grade.

We are not Jesus.

We are not seated at right hand of God the Father.

We are not charged to judge the living and the dead.

That's not our job.

## AFFLICTING THE COMFORTABLE

So, how does our interpretation change if we don't identify with Jesus?

Suppose, for example, we identify with the religious leaders ...those who used the Temple to turn a profit?

What happens if we put ourselves not on the handle end of whip, but on the receiving end?

Then, this passage gets to be a bit more frightening.

Like the religious leaders of old we might want to question Jesus' motives.

"How dare you do this Jesus?

This is not what a Savior should do.

Whatever happened to the Jesus who cares for the children... and holds the little baby lamb?

You don't look a thing like the picture on my Sunday School wall."

Never fear.

That Jesus is still with us.

He still goes in search for the lamb that is lost.

He still waits for the sinner to return home.

He still bids the little children to come to him.

The gospel of John will give us some of those stories a little later on.

But, there's more to Jesus than that.

Jesus is always more complex than we make him out to be.

Jesus not only comforts the afflicted.

He also afflicts the comfortable!

You see, God's justice and God's mercy are two sides of the same coin.

You can't have one without the other.

In fact, one of the ways that God comforts the little lambs of this world is by standing up for truth and justice.

And sometimes, in order to do that Jesus has to drive out demons and money hungry religious leaders.

You see, the kingdom of God is in conflict with the kingdoms of this world. God's ways are not our ways.

And so when Jesus comes to town,  
...storm clouds are brewing.

Today's lesson emphasizes the conflict that occurs when the kingdoms of this world meet the Kingdom of God.

When the disciples saw what Jesus was doing  
... they remembered the words of the Psalm,  
"Zeal for your house will consume me."

## TRUE WORSHIP AND REPENTANCE

Jesus was consumed by his passion for true worship.

And later in John's gospel Jesus will make an even greater claim.

He will suggest that temples are not even that necessary.

In response to the Samaritan woman's question about the proper place of worship,  
Jesus says that attempts to restrict worship to any physical site are misguided.

It doesn't make any difference where we worship.  
Temples and their locations are not that important.  
The important point is how we worship.

He told the woman at the well,  
"For God is spirit, and those who worship him  
...must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24)

So, what does it mean to worship God in spirit and truth?

It begins with personal repentance.

The woman at the well didn't really care about where people worshipped.

She was just trying to point the finger of blame at others to take the focus away from her own flaws.

And that's the mistake we make ...if we think about this passage only in terms of what others do wrong.

When we read this passage, the first thing we need to remember is that when we point the finger at others there are three fingers pointing back at us.

Let's not judge others.

Let's think about how our actions are under the judgment of God.  
Let's think about how, as the old rock song puts it,  
...the "buyers and the sellers are no different 'fellers from what I pretend to be."

One of the important themes of the season of Lent is personal repentance.

Each year at this time we think about things in our life that need to change.

You've heard of people giving up something for Lent.

Maybe someone would give up ice cream because they've been eating too many sweets.

They are repenting of a lifestyle that's not healthy. That sort of thing.

But, this passage suggests a repentance that is more wide ranging.

## TURNING TABLES

Jesus doesn't come into our lives just to tinker around the edges.

Jesus comes into our lives to turn over our tables

...drive out our demons.

Our life is way too messed up to just get good advice. We need good news.

We need a Savior who will turn the world upside down and inside out.

We need a Savior who will turn *us* upside down and inside out.

We need a Savior who will drive out our complacency.

We need a Savior who will challenge our love of money.

We need a Savior who will point us away from ourselves and toward the Holy.

This means that Lent is a time when we ask ourselves some really hard questions. Questions like:

Have I sold out the Holy Spirit by replacing Him with the sacrificial dove business?

Have I baptized my personal preferences... instead of really listening to what God in Christ is telling me to do and be?

Jesus challenged those who made money in the name of religion.

And this was one of the actions eventually leads to a cross. When you hit someone in the pocketbook, they will strike back.

The Bible tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil. (1 Timothy 6:10)

We all know that money influences politics.  
But, money can also influence religion as well.  
In fact money, religion and politics  
...are often bound together in an unholy trinity.

Today's lesson is a good example.  
The Temple that Jesus cleansed was known as Herod's Temple.

And Herod, as most of you know by now,  
was not a nice man (to put it mildly).

This psychopath/king  
...was responsible for the death of John the Baptist,  
a man the people believed to be a prophet from God.

He was absolutely brutal.

He was a homicidal maniac who came from a family of homicidal maniacs.  
(Come to think of it. Herod sounds like some rulers we hear about in our day and time.)

But, Herod was in a class by himself.

He even threatened and killed members of his own family.

In fact this happened so often that the Roman Emperor quipped that since Jews didn't eat pork, it was "safer to be one Herod's pigs than to be one of his sons"!

But, Herod, despite his madness, wanted to be loved by the people.

So, he spent a lot of money on building projects.

In particular he built an elaborate Temple and a complex of buildings around the Temple.

The people may not have liked Herod.  
But, they did like the glory of the Temple.

In the synoptic gospels we learn that some of Jesus' own disciples marveled over the size of the stones and the fantastic architecture associated with the Temple.

Herod was a scoundrel, but at least he (and his father before him) created great infrastructure.  
So, some people just learned to live with this crazy family.

That's how strong men stay in power even today.  
They give the people what they want (or what they think they want) while being absolutely cruel to their enemies.

But, God's people didn't need a bigger Temple and more elaborate rituals.  
Big buildings do not make for true worship.

According to Scripture, the foundation of true worship is a pure heart.  
The foundation of true worship is a people who love God and their neighbors as themselves.

That was not what this Temple represented.  
This Temple was beautiful, but it was deeply flawed from the beginning.

The Psalmist wrote, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

This House, this Temple was not built by the Lord.

This Temple was built by the Herod family.

So Jesus is challenging not only the Wal-Mart like practices in the Temple.  
Jesus is also challenging the existence of the Temple itself.

Can a building built on the backs of the poor,

by a man who is crazy and immoral,  
really honor God?

Not so much.

## THE SIGN

In our lesson the religious leaders challenge Jesus' right to cleanse the Temple.

They want Jesus to give them a sign,  
do some miracle so that they know he has the authority to turn over the tables.

And so Jesus says,  
"Here's you sign.  
Tear down the Temple,  
and in three days I'll build it back."

They may have thought Jesus was crazy before  
... turning over all those tables and driving the sacrificial animals out of the courtyard.

But, now they were sure of it.

They said,

"What are you talking about?  
This Temple has been under construction for 46 years.

And you're going to rebuild it in three days?  
Give us a break!"

We can understand why the religious leaders took exception to what Jesus said.  
It must have sounded really crazy.

But, John lets us in on a secret.

Jesus wasn't talking about the temple at Jerusalem.  
Jesus was talking about the temple of his body.

God was in Christ.  
The Word had become flesh.

So if you're looking for the temple,  
if you're looking for that place where God resides,  
you need look no further than the man, Jesus.

And the proof of that will come later...  
The resurrection.

The resurrection will be the final and decisive sign that the kingdom of God  
has come.

The religious and political leaders did indeed destroy the temple,  
the place where the Spirit of God resided.

They destroyed Jesus.  
They crucified him.  
But, on the third day he rose again.

The disciples didn't fully understand what Jesus was saying at the time.

But, after the resurrection,  
they looked back on this confrontation  
and realized that it held a deeper meaning.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus,  
the temple was destroyed and rebuilt in a whole new way.

In John's gospel, Jesus goes to Jerusalem twice.

The first time he dramatically cracks the whip  
and challenges the powers that be directly.

But, before John's story is over Jesus will return for another Passover.

And the religious and political leaders will do their worst.  
They will destroy the Temple in which the Spirit of God resides.

They will crucify Christ.

But, once again God in Christ turns the tables.

What they meant for evil,  
God used for good.

As one commentator put it, when Jesus comes to Jerusalem this second time,

“Forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and resurrection are also coming. He comes to save “wrong-hearted, wrong-headed, dove-selling sinners.”

In short.  
People like you and me. That’s good news.

Do you remember what Jesus said?  
“My body broken for you.  
My blood shed for you.”

Amen.