

We often envision a “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild” . . . Well, *not today*. Jesus goes to the Temple in Jerusalem at Passover, and makes quite a scene. Has Jesus finally just had it, so he lashes out at the merchants crowded into the outer court of the Temple? If Jesus *laughed* and Jesus *cried*, maybe here Jesus just *got angry*? I think Jesus is demonstrating a kind of parable of actions, showing who he is so people might believe in him and follow him.

In Jesus’ day, power in Jewish life was largely centered in the Jerusalem Temple. It was like Washington D.C., Wall Street, and the Vatican, all rolled into one; a political, economic, and religious power center. During festivals, the Temple was hardly a peaceful place of worship. The outer courtyard of the most holy place in the most holy city, was the only area in the Temple complex open to the Gentiles who had come to seek the God of Israel. That space had been taken over by the tables of the merchants. At Passover, several hundred thousand pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem to offer their Temple sacrifices and pay the Temple tax. The “moneychanger” business thrived as visitors sought to exchange their local coins for the shekels necessary for the temple tax. Shekels didn’t circulate outside the Temple, and the money of the Roman Empire was not allowed to be put into the Temple treasury because those coins were engraved with images of the Emperor.

The Temple authorities and their families had a monopoly on renting spaces to merchants who supplied animals for temple sacrifices, the unspotted ox or unblemished sheep, or a couple of pigeons for those too poor to provide anything else. The pilgrims needed them to carry out their religious obligations--and as long as the Temple stood, somebody somewhere would make it their business to supply them.

Merchants were able to charge prices amounting to extortion, and the exchange rate could be jacked up. It was a system riddled with greed and graft, but generally people let it be. It fulfilled a need. It was *just the way it was*. Like a lot of things in this world.

In turning over the tables, Jesus attacks not only the abuses evident in the Temple trade. That would be disruptive enough. But Jesus goes much deeper; he challenges the power of the Temple itself. He warns the authorities that the time was coming when the Temple would not be conducting any business at all, for what we call the “*cleansing of the Temple*” previews the toppling of the Temple itself at the hands of the Roman legions about 40 years later. But I assure you, it really doesn’t have any comparison to the cleaning of the sanctuary that folks were here working on yesterday!

As happens *often* in the gospel of John, those who hear Jesus misunderstand what he is saying. They think he is talking about rebuilding Herod’s Temple, the magnificent building 46 years in the making. Their misunderstanding gives Jesus the chance to share a deeper meaning. John, unlike in the other Gospels, uses the same word for “*raising up*” the Temple as we hear at Easter --“*raising up*” -- the resurrection of Jesus. When talking about the Temple, Jesus was speaking about himself.

This story happens during Passover, when Jewish families remember how the angel of death “*passed over*” their homes, sparing them when the plagues were ravaging their captors. They remember how God led their ancestors out of Egypt to freedom. At Passover, they celebrate a move from death to life, from slavery to freedom. In the gospel of John, Jesus *himself* transforms “Passover.” He *is*, in the chronology of John, the “Passover Lamb who was slain.” He is the one brings us from death to life. Jesus becomes the New Temple, where God gives new life.

Jesus is doing more than just reclaiming the holiness of the Temple, as he turns over the tables. Jesus is claiming the authority *for himself* to do just that. The religious leaders are not surprisingly outraged at this claim; eventually it gets Jesus killed. But ironically, it is that very death, and his resurrection three days later, which demonstrates that Jesus *did indeed* have a *right* to overturn those tables. His opponents ask, “*where is your authority?*” and his final answer is “*see my life and my death and my resurrection.*” Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. There. *That* is my authority.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, the people of Israel hear how God can claim the authority to *tell* them how to live together by giving them the Ten Commandments. In the wilderness, God reminds the rescued slaves: “*I brought you up out of bondage, out of Egypt and I am bringing you to the Promised Land.*” The authority of Jesus over our lives *also* comes from liberation. Jesus frees us from the power of sin to cut us off from God, our neighbors, and our own best selves. Our Lord offers us a life shaped by trust and love, given and shared freely. The good news is that we don’t have to deserve it; God promises to give us, through Jesus, what we cannot earn on our own.

God is not willing to just overlook the mess that we make of our lives and our world when we allow our temples to be overrun with other gods. God cares about how we live our lives, how we relate to God and how we treat each other and the creation that God has entrusted to us. The Gospel of Jesus, the message of the cross, overturns the tables of our assumptions about how the world must work – maybe even our deep-down assumptions about how God should act. Our God is not willing to simply let what passes for wisdom take over-- self-centered and self-serving *business as usual* --not in the Jerusalem of Jesus, and not in our lives here and now.

God knows how easy it is to let our own agendas take over the space that God wants to fill. Jesus turns our tables over because God loves us and wants us to be what we were created to be: the very Temple of *God’s* own Spirit at work loving the world. Jesus turns our tables to turn us over to new life in Jesus. Turns us to tune our ears to a word of grace, God waiting and wanting to forgive and to raise us up, again and again, to new life and new possibilities. Amid all the hustle and bustle of all the many competing claims on our time and our energy and commitment, where might God be at work, *turning over the tables* in your life?

The Apostle Paul writes to the early church, challenging the barriers that separated the Jews and the newcomer Gentiles from *each other* and from *God*. Paul was turning some tables over. *Both sides* were off-base, falling short of the mark, as they wrangled over who had the religious upper-hand. The Jews wanted some sign to prove that God was the One upending the old rules and expectations. The Gentiles were accustomed to philosophical debates based on human categories of logic and “wisdom” -- the idea of a suffering God, an embodied God who would die, disgraced, just didn’t cut it for them

*Both sides* stumbled on Paul’s message about Jesus. Both sides are called back to their vital shared identity in Jesus: made right with God, not on account of their own beliefs or activities, but because Jesus had claimed them in love, brought them together, and given them the task of sharing the news about Jesus. Having overturned all the “*business as usual*” tables, in a world that expects to see and rely on self-serving transactions, Jesus clears the deck for the true wisdom, the tables-turned foolishness of God *saving through serving*: Jesus – *crucified and risen for the life of the world*.

When we gather here in God’s name at the Lord’s Supper, the Table is *set*, not *overturned*. Here love is poured out, not coins. Here, as we take in the good news of the cross of Christ, the wisdom of God, here God promises to *give* us what cannot be bought or sold. Here, God stands by us in times of uncertainty and fear and failure, in times of sadness and loss, in times of dreary discouragement and fragile hopes. Lord, when we face the wreckage left by our reliance on the false gods of this world, give us courage and wisdom. Give us the grace to live as a Temple of your Spirit, and to trust no other gods besides You. When we fail to put you first in our lives, empower us to remember and trust your enduring love for us, that we may *turn again* to You and *live* as your faithful people forever.