

TURNING THE TABLES

TEXT: John 2:13-22

Well, today's story is certainly a familiar one. It is told in all four of the Gospels with, of course, some variations in the details. And, as usual, John's take has some striking differences from the other three. Where in Matthew, Mark and Luke the temple scene follows Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (at the end of his ministry), John's version is moved to immediately after Jesus' first sign, the wedding at Cana (the beginning of his ministry). That being the case, Jesus' act of rebellion in the Temple would not have been the final straw in the authorities' quest to arrest and kill him. John offers the raising of Lazarus as the catalyst for the anger of the authorities. To bring someone back to life would have them rushing to get rid of one who was able to do that.

But, the timing of this event is not the critical thing. Here's what's happening: Jesus enters the temple and finds what one would expect during a pilgrimage festival. The vital trades are in place for the necessary exchange of monies, animals, and grains for the required sacrifice. Nothing is out of order at this point. The narration happens in real time, as the reader can see everything that Jesus sees. Yet, Jesus' command to the dove sellers differs strikingly from the accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Instead of a concern for temple malpractices ("den of robbers"), Jesus orders that his Father's house not be made a marketplace. For the temple system to survive, however, the ordered transactions of a marketplace were essential. The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures. Jesus is not quibbling about malfeasance or mismanagement but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system. Underneath this critique lies also the intimation that the temple itself is not necessary. At the center of all this is the fundamental question of God's location, which we see in the dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish authorities.

So John tells his story. He starts by telling us about the temple – the physical temple. It had been undergoing construction for over four decades already and was not even finished. How could one not be impressed with such a grand undertaking?

Solomon's Temple wasn't just *another* church. Not even just another *important* church. It wasn't like St. Peter's in the Vatican, or Westminster Abbey in London, or St. Patrick's in New York City. Solomon's Temple was the *only* place of worship in Israel. It was God's House, not just one-of-the-houses-of God. The other important distinction, when it comes to the Temple in Jerusalem, is that it wasn't the House of the People of God; it was the House of God.

Implicit in our Protestant theology is that a "church" is merely the place where people come to gather and hear God's Word. In such a mindset, God is no more "present" in the church building than anywhere else. What makes the building holy and sacred is that it is set apart for the people to come and worship. There may be deep emotional and spiritual ties associated with the building, but God is everywhere, not just there.

However, that's not the theology of the Temple. In the center of the Temple – in the Holy of Holies – the Ark of the Covenant was set. And there, in the heart of the Temple complex, in the heart of the city, which served as the spiritual and political heart of Israel...God dwelt among God's people.

This is important – it cannot be overstated, because in our reading today, Jesus identifies himself as The Temple. If we don't understand the theological significance of the Temple as THE place where the actual Presence of God Almighty dwells among God's people, then we miss the theological significance of what Jesus is saying here.

Jesus is saying that *he is the place where the Presence of God dwells among His People*. Part of the significance of this is that when John's audience was reading this, it was only a few decades after Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The people in Jerusalem and all of first century Palestine were still trying to figure out how to get along without a Temple. When they read John's Gospel however, they were comforted in that there was another Temple. And it was Jesus.

Jesus was telling his listeners that deep connection to God could be found through *him*, not through a building. Not encased in stone and mortar. But in *him*.

So, let's go back to the story. What does all this have to do with Jesus' turning the tables in the Temple? Well, it has a lot – in fact, it has everything to do with what Jesus did in the Temple that day.

So John tells us the story. It was Passover and Jesus went to the temple. There he found the merchants who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons. He found the money-changers who were reaping profits from the pilgrims who had come for the Passover, and who were buying the animals for their offerings in the Temple. And Jesus turned the tables. He turned the tables literally. He made a whip of cords and drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the Temple. He poured out the coins of the money-changers. And he turned their tables over so that all that they had collected was strewn on the ground.

It must have been a wonderful, chaotic scene – pigeons flying, oxen and sheep running every which way, tables crashing, men yelling, and bystanders looking aghast at this man raising havoc in their sacred Temple. Jesus was yelling as well: “Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade”.

Then the Jews asked him what the heck he was doing – or something like that. And his answer turned the tables on them again. He said: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”. That took them back a step or two. “It's taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?” This guy must be nuts!

But the tables had been turned – both literally and metaphorically. Of course, they initially interpreted Jesus' declaration literally, that the temple of which Jesus speaks is the one Jewish temple in which they are standing. We find out, and eventually some of the bystanders will discover, that the temple of which Jesus speaks is not the temple in Jerusalem, but the temple of his body. Jesus himself is the presence of God.

The reference to the three days is, of course, a foreshadowing of the resurrection, but also the ascension. As a result, Jerusalem is at once the location of the completeness of Jesus' ministry – his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension – not just the place of his death. If the temple symbolizes the location and presence of God, Jesus is

essentially saying to the Jewish leaders that *he* is the presence of God. Where one looks for God, expects to find God, imagines God to be, are all at stake for the Gospel of John. In Jesus, God is right here, right in front of you. That Jesus is the revelation of God, the one and only God, will be repeatedly reinforced with different sets of images, different characters, different directives, all pointing back to this essential truth.

And this is the important message for us today. We all have emotional ties to the place where we worship, but God is no more “present” in the church building than anywhere else. What makes a building holy and sacred is that it is set apart for the people to come and worship. There may be emotional and spiritual ties associated with the building, but God is everywhere, not just there.

Jesus is saying that *he’s the place where the Presence of God dwells among God’s people*. When Jesus says these words he is telling his listeners that their deep connection to God could be found through *him*. Not through a building. Not encased in stone and mortar. But, in *him*.

Bodies matter. Your body matters. Our bodies embody the truth of the Gospel. We are the people who are witnesses to God’s love in the world. Our bodies embody the truth of the Gospel. In the end, Jesus is saying that his body is the location of God. Yours is too. It has to be. God is counting on it because God loves the world. Jesus is counting on it because his incarnation came to an end on that cross.

Jesus turned the tables literally when he disrupted the merchandising in the Temple. He turns the tables of our society every day when we tell the world that God dwells in every nook and cranny of our world, and lives within each of us as we proclaim and live the gospel in the temples and on the streets. This is the Word made flesh. Amen.