

Turning Over Tables
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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John 2: 13-22
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Imagine a little mom n' pop style diner. Insert yourself on Independence Boulevard if it helps. Think about this little restaurant at the very beginning – the stage when it was a dream fulfilled: good simple food, served with genuine hospitality; a gathering place to help people rest and refuel, and head out into the community ready to do another day's worth of work or play.

Now imagine this restaurant concept takes off. And before long, it's the most popular joint in Charlotte. And the money starts rolling in. And the franchises come with it. And there's one on every corner of every street in the region. And the money's good, y'all. But something's changed. This little restaurant is no longer about serving good food. It's all about turning over tables: pushing as many people through the meal cycle as possible to generate the most profits. And if the food's still good, well that's just an added bonus.

It seems to me, when we get SO busy and SO obsessed with turning over tables, we need a presence that will quite literally, turn those tables on their side. And that's what Jesus does in this morning's lection. Jesus invites us, or better yet shocks us into a conversation about our priorities.

First, an abridged history lesson. Hundreds of years prior to Jesus, Good King Josiah reformed the practice of Judaism. He standardized or formalized the temple cult, much in the same way Constantine did for Christianity. What does that mean? Under Josiah's orders, all Jewish persons needed to visit the Jerusalem Temple three times a year for the most sacred festivals, Passover being one of those. The temple, then, became not only the centerpiece of religious life, but also the economic engine of the region.

There's a second part to all of this. Roman coins featured the face of the emperor, God on earth. Pious Jews refused to make offerings, or purchase animals for sacrifice with such coins. Therefore, the temple establishment made its own coins that could be acquired at money-changing stations. But the money-changers didn't practice much altruism in their trade, and they charged traveling pilgrims an exorbitant amount in transfer fees.

Over the centuries, offering services to pilgrims became a profitable industry. And it's not a stretch to imagine that the temple courtyard would have borne many resemblances to the most famous tourism sites of today: vendors peddling all kinds of "necessary" services and goods at exorbitant rates.

Jesus enters the temple, and I think he looks around and says, "When did all of you stop caring a little less about the purpose of this place, to love and honor God? And when did you start caring more about how many tables you could turn over, or how many people you could churn through the system?"

Jesus' lesson for today is not how to profit from the worship of God. Seeking such profit is to miss the entire point of worship. When we profane God's presence with profits, we are blinded to God's abundance.

Jesus' lesson is this: when we worship God properly, when we allow God's presence to transform us, we live in abundance, and we have no need of such profits.

Since our Lenten theme is about missing conversations, I want to invite us to explore the subject matter Jesus offers this morning: what are we prioritizing in God's House? And I promise we'll get there. But I need you to hang on to that thought for just a minute. So remember: priorities for God's House.

There's some other stuff in today's text, too. And quite frankly, some of it is abhorrent and dangerous – it's difficult to read, and difficult to make sense of. But we can't ignore it altogether, and still say we are having a genuine conversation. This is the first passage in John where the term "the Jews" is used in a negative way. And this gospel portrayal is the only one where Jesus actually makes the whip himself – in the others, he just picks one up. And if we try hard enough (though not in a very thorough and academically-sound reading of the text) we can infer that Jesus uses the whip not only on animals, but humans as well.

I don't have time this morning to help you process these verses in a healthy way, and certainly not in a complete way. So let me just say this: much of the language of John, and indeed all four gospels, reflects tensions between Jewish and Jewish-Christian sects in the century following Jesus' death. And as the writers made sense of his life and ministry, Jesus' words and actions were often reflected and projected into the current setting of these writers. We have to read these verses with care. And we have to be willing to recognize that enemies and adversaries of Jesus are often portrayed in ways that are more emotionally-charged rather than historically and theologically accurate.

But there is good news. The adult Bible Study is working its way through John. We welcome you to that conversation. If that time doesn't work, know that we would be eager to establish a group that meets outside of working hours to explore questions about John and other sacred texts. And we remind you that part of the conversation, a good conversation, is your freedom to ask questions, and an assurance of an audience willing to listen without judgement.

Back to the main conversation point. When Jesus turns over the tables, he's asking the temple authorities to think about their priorities. And he's asking you and me as well.

What is the purpose of this space, and of the people who fill it?

Are we here to honor God, to live out our purpose of praising and worshiping God, of acknowledging that God is our source? Are we here to better recognize the presence of God in ourselves and in others?

Or do all of our activities come with a caveat?

Is the goal of proper worship to attract visitors and guests – the kind who will fill out information cards, and like us on Facebook, and write checks, and start families who will grow our numbers, and who might even put our decal on their windshield?

Or is the goal of worship to present God in an authentic way – a way that will help someone who feels broken or lost or discouraged or is just in need of an hour of spiritual rest, experience the presence of God in their lives. Even if that only happens once at Sardis. Even if we never see them again?

Should this be the kind of space where we only say comfortable things? And where everything runs on schedule? And where we meet God like we're living in a performance: an environment where every note sung off-key, or every candle extinguished pre-maturely, or every baby's commotion, or every shout of Amen or heartfelt clap is an affront to God's standing?

Or should this be the kind of space where people are freed to be themselves, flawed but no less beautiful, and no less complete in the eyes of their maker? And so comfortable, so free, so confident in God's love and grace, that worship, genuine praise for God, is a gift? Are we a congregation whose goal is to fill committees, and meet budgets, and manicure our lawn?

Or are we a congregation whose goal is to empower all of its community members to discover their gifts, and share them with others, even if it looks different than it used to?

Are we a congregation that counts time? Do we worry if an extra verse, or a few more prayers of petition, or a long sermon, or somebody making an expression of faith or commitment (today of all days!), or a lengthy Communion will delay our spot in line at the K&W or prevent us from seeing kick-off?

Or do we value the possibility that one poignant moment may reveal the divine to one of us? Do we celebrate the idea that people feel comfortable to make known their deepest concerns, to be vulnerable in community, because this space is sacred and safe? Do we value a spirit that says, "I can't be content with traditional theories and decimal point answers? I need something more?"

When Jesus turns over the tables, he's jolting us back into reality. He's reminding us that sacred spaces need to be treated in sacred ways. And he's reminding us of our responsibility to be aware of such spaces.

But what he does next is just as important. He doesn't just treat the temple as sacred. He treats the world, and the people who fill it as sacred. He is after all, the Word, God manifested among us. And when we stand in the presence of God, we stand on holy ground.

And wouldn't you know it, Jesus goes out into the world, and makes it his sanctuary. The woman at the well, the blind man, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, the disciples and countless others, all become beneficiaries of his love and healing. Jesus is not a profiteer. He is a servant, one whose primary interest is the will of God.

And I suppose, if we want to be servants, too, and if we want to honor our temple called Sardis, we need to think about the tables and conversations we turn over. Are we in hurry to plow on through, only in an effort to move on to more pressing things like earning profits? Or are we ready and willing to linger at a table, intent on something much greater than profits: God's abundance?

There will be times when Jesus, and perhaps those who do his work, will turn our tables on their sides. When we get them back upright, we must ask the question: profits or abundance?

Amen.