

## Overtured Tables

After the wedding at Cana in last week's text, Jesus heads to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples. From there, they head up to Jerusalem during the Passover celebration. In our text for this morning, Jesus has his first encounter with the religious leaders in the Temple. While John will often write of Jesus debating "the Jews," scholars largely agree that John is not speaking of the Jewish people in a general sense, but of those in charge. Tragically, texts like ours have been twisted and abused over the centuries to justify horrific acts against our Jewish siblings. The reality is that John's original audience, along with Jesus, his family, and his disciples were Jewish, so these debates are part of a rift within one family, not an example of an entire people pitted against Jesus and his followers. As another preacher points out: "Most scholars believe that this text was written by Jews, exiled from the synagogue, who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. This is insider language, borne of grief, distance and change."<sup>1</sup> In an effort to hear John's text as scholars believe it was intended, over the weeks and months ahead, I will use the term "Jewish leaders" in reading and preaching. [Read John 2:13-25]

There is a part of me that wishes we could linger at the wedding for a bit longer, but John chooses to take us right to the heart of things by bringing Jesus to Jerusalem and into the Temple during the Passover celebration. The other three gospels place this event at the end of their accounts, at the cusp of Holy Week, while the gospel of John places this event almost at the beginning. Most scholars agree that this disruption probably occurred toward the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, because it is unlikely that the powers that be would tolerate such behavior for three more years. So why does John include it here?

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/02/march-15-2009-john-213-22-esta-jarrett.html>

In these early chapters, John introduces the readers to Jesus, trying to give us an understanding of who he is. From the gospel's opening lines, John emphasizes the incarnation—God's Word made flesh—in Jesus Christ. John cannot emphasize enough that in Jesus God dwells among us, “tabernacles” among us. John wants us to understand that in Jesus God lives and moves and breathes and walks around among us, “moves into the neighborhood,” as one translation reads.<sup>2</sup> Incarnation is not simply a big theological word; incarnation transforms how we understand God, faith, church, and life itself. Incarnation is a disruption in the ways things have worked before, and this episode in the Temple underscores this disruption in a vivid way. Jesus' ruckus in the Temple is more than clickbait. He is not making a scene simply to make a scene. Instead, in John's account Jesus is demonstrating that with his arrival, everything has changed. He turns over tables and shoos away the sacrificial animals, not as an indictment of the sacrificial system but to insist that that system is no longer necessary.

In a way I find it funny that this section is known as “The Cleansing of the Temple.” When I think of cleansing, I think of spring cleaning where walls are scrubbed, rugs are taken outside and beaten, windows are washed, closets are cleaned out, drawers are organized, and order is restored. This cleansing of the Temple does involve some clearing out, but Jesus leaves a massive mess in his wake. With his words and with his whip he runs off those selling sheep and cattle, leaving behind heaven knows what. He turns over tables and dumps out the money changers' coins. The mess he makes is more than a physical mess; his presence and his actions turn the Temple itself on its head. Because of his disruption, “no sacrifices or tithes could be offered that day,” during one of the busiest seasons of the year.<sup>3</sup> The mess doesn't end there. Understandably, the leaders in the Temple want to know just why and how Jesus thinks he has the authority to throw everything into chaos. *This is not the way things are done. Just who does he think he is?* “What sign can you show us for doing this?” they ask.<sup>4</sup> The sign they demand is not necessarily the same

---

<sup>2</sup> John 1:14, The Message

<sup>3</sup> Gail R. O'Day, “The Gospel of John,” *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 545.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:18, NRSVue

kind of sign we heard about last week. They simply want to know where Jesus, this newcomer from Nazareth gets the idea that he can just march in and turn everything upside down.<sup>5</sup> Earlier, we hear him describe the Temple as “his Father’s house,” but that isn’t enough to satisfy these leaders. The conversation then follows a pattern that will become familiar in John’s gospel. One scholar describes it as John’s “narrative technique of misunderstanding.”<sup>6</sup> We might say that they talk past each other. Jesus declares that if they tear down the Temple, he will raise it up in three days. The leaders understandably scoff at his answer.

As you’ll recall, throughout their wandering and wondering, the Israelites longed for the Temple, a place where the Ark of the Covenant could be housed, a place where humanity could be connected to God in a special way. No one believed that any one building could contain God. Instead, the Temple served as a thin place, a sacred space set aside for humanity to encounter and worship the holy. King Solomon led the building of the First Temple, which was destroyed when the Babylonians conquered ancient Israel and sent the bulk of Jerusalem’s citizens into exile. When Jesus arrives on the scene, the campaign to build the Second Temple has been underway for 46 years, so his words about destroying it and raising it again in three short days sound absurd. *It can’t be done*, they insist. This structure and its traditions have taken years to construct. The leaders convince themselves that Jesus is talking nonsense, and the conversation ends there, for now. John then tells us that the answer makes sense to the disciples, but only after Jesus’ death and resurrection. In hindsight, they understand what Jesus is saying. Only through the lens of his resurrection—the holy disruption of death itself—does the mess Jesus makes begin to make sense.

This astonishing revelation would have been great good news for John’s first hearers, who are all too familiar with disruption. When this gospel is written around the year 80 or 90, the Second Temple, lies in ruins, destroyed in a devastating war with the Romans.<sup>7</sup> John’s community would hear good news in this

---

<sup>5</sup> O’Day, 544.

<sup>6</sup> O’Day, 544.

<sup>7</sup> Matt Skinner, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/onscripture/2012/03/john-213-22-where-can-god-be-found/>

assurance that the Temple was not lost to them. They would find hope in hearing that in the resurrected Christ, God creates a new Temple, a meeting place between heaven and earth that cannot be destroyed.

But what about us? What might a table-turning Jesus be saying to you and me? I honestly am not looking for a lot of disruption, not here, not now. The world is turning and churning, and disruption is an everyday occurrence. *I'm good, Jesus. Can you just leave well enough alone with me and us for now?*

Along with many of you, I caught a glimpse of the Buddhist monks on their journey this past week when they passed through Concord. For something so powerful, it is such a simple thing really. Men dressed in saffron robes, walking 20 miles each day in an effort to embody and offer peace in a tangled and torn up world. One friend in Charlotte spoke of witnessing something holy breaking into our everyday, broken world. Others spoke of being surprised by the tears that they shed. And still others said they were on a high for the rest of the day after simply witnessing these men walk by. The walk was and still is disruptive, of course. Traffic has to be managed, along with bystanders. The monks' arrival threw off schedules a bit. And yet, not many of us seemed to mind all that much. It was a welcome disruption, some might say, nice, gentle, and yes, even holy.

Jesus' disruption in the Temple is starkly different of course. No one was tracking him on Google maps; no one cleared a path for him to walk quietly into the thick of the Temple during one of its most crowded days so that he could hand me a flower. And the monks did not stride into our morning worship and toss our noisy offering buckets to the ground or start cracking whips. I was able to witness them on my timeline and on my terms out there, and their presence offered me and others a blessed and welcome moment of peace in a tumultuous season. Jesus' arrival catches the community off guard, and his actions throw everything into disarray without warning. Yes, there is a part of me that wishes Jesus would stride in quietly, too, passing out flowers and offering gentle blessings. And occasionally, he does. That said, this Temple disruption is breathtaking and life-changing and powerful, great good news for me and for us and for everyone. And if he didn't upend everything, there is a good chance that I might miss him.

Some have said that Jesus' turning the Temple on its head gives Christians a model to follow, a call to confront the things that need to change with bravado and courage, to wield a whip if necessary. And on occasion, I think they are right. **And** I am not Jesus, especially not in this text. The reality is that I probably have a lot more in common with the religious leaders who are just trying to keep the wheels turning, who are doing their best to attend to the pilgrims who have traveled great distances to celebrate God's liberating ways in Jerusalem, carrying with them their prayers and hopes and hurts. Perhaps the leaders had convinced themselves that things were fine enough as they were. I confess I have often done the same. I also confess that Jesus has marched in and turned my well-laid plans and routines on their heads, more than once. And before I dare charge out with a whip of my own making, I realize I'd be wise to pay attention to where and when Jesus is turning over something in me first.

As I think I have shared with at least some of you, I had no plans to go to seminary when I was in college. Honestly, I had no real plans at all when I crossed the stage at Davidson almost 35 years ago. Over the course of that summer, I was stunned to discern that ministry was where I was meant to be. Then I went to seminary thinking I'd kind of dabble or dip my toe in this church thing, with my feet planted firmly on familiar territory, while married to a doctor, an engineer, a banker, or a lawyer. And then this sweet Baptist boy crossed my path, with plans to become a professor. We got married, and he became Presbyterian. After I worked at the seminary for a few years, we were called Down East, to Greenville, NC for me to work at a church doing campus ministry. And then after 5 years in the land of sweet tea, eastern NC BBQ, and y'all, we were called to move to Pennsylvania with a five-week-old. After a year at home with her, I dipped my toe in once again thinking I'd find a nice, safe, comfortable associate pastor position where I could do a bit of visiting but not preaching every week. Certainly not. So of course I found myself preaching every week, in the most conservative congregation in the presbytery. These dear ones loved me and walked alongside me ever so faithfully, giving me a chance to try out regular preaching, even though we disagreed on almost every theological point, except that God loves us more than we can name. That's

the thing. I get my tables arranged just so, and I start to lean on those tables and forget whose they are and whose I am. And I risk forgetting that the tables are not what save me or sustain me. The One who topples them is.

Unlike those leaders in that Temple moment, we have the benefit of hindsight. We routinely profess and proclaim that in Jesus Christ God takes on flesh and blood and moves into the neighborhood. Like those leaders, however, I don't think we expect him to stir us or anything else up. *Welcome to the neighborhood, Jesus. Please keep your grass mowed and the music down and join us for an occasional potluck.* But that's not how God's Word made flesh works. He has been born among us, and everything has changed. Our structures, our practices, and our preferences cannot contain him or corral him. He will not stay in his lane or follow my schedule. In fact, he will likely chuckle at my carefully designed plans, while scattering my papers and nudging me on a different path. All because he wants me to see him for who *he* is and who I need him to be, not who I think I want him to be. I need God's Word made flesh; I need the Lamb of God; I need a Savior. We all do. On his terms. Not mine. And when I get too attached to my tables and my plans, he may just have to cause a ruckus and upend things to get my attention, yet again.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.