

**Turning the Tables**  
**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher**  
**March 7, 2021**  
**John 2:13–22**

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<sup>13</sup>The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the Temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” <sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” <sup>18</sup>The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” <sup>20</sup>The Jews then said, “This Temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup>But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup>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.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

That day when Jesus came into the Temple and upended everything was quite a day. One that I will never forget. You see I was there. Who I am or what I do is not important. I was one in the many who came to the Temple that day because it was almost time for the Passover. I was part of the crowds who were around the Temple when Jesus of Nazareth came and caused that unforgettable stir. Many others tell this story. All four Gospels wrote about what happened. People are still trying to figure

out all that it means even today. Everyone who was there or has heard about it has a different take on why he upended the tables. Today, with the help of the Gospel writer John and some other theologians along the way, let me give you my take of what happened that memorable day when Jesus turned the tables in the Temple.

It was near Passover, and Passover, as you know is an important time for us Jews. Passover is about our freedom. As important as it is for us, it is an uneasy time for the Romans who rule over us. First of all, many of us come from out of town into Jerusalem. We gather knowing that the Passover is the story of how God liberated us from slavery, from another body ruling over us. You don't have to connect the dots to realize that the Romans and those working with them would be on edge with the thoughts of freedom and God's rule in our heads. They are waiting and watching for any kind of trouble.

We Jews are very proud of our Temple and what it represents. It is a place where the Romans let us have our own space and allow us to worship our one God. In fact, the Temple is something we would die for rather than see it be desecrated. Years later when Caligula was the Emperor, he tried to get his image placed into the Temple courtyard. There was an uprising then, where we Jews fought to the death not to desecrate our house of God with Roman influence. Caligula's statue did not stay! We are tolerant to a point. For example, in Jesus' time, Herod had built the court of the Gentiles where people of all faiths can enter. But you don't go putting an image of the Emperor in the place where we worship God who said "Do not make a graven images!" No, that does not play well.

People come from all over and they save up their earnings to make the trip. When they come to the Temple, they need to pay the Temple tax. We know that the upkeep and the running of the Temple cannot get by

on prayer alone. We all have a part in it. So, every male brings a shekel when he comes to the Temple. Since we hold true that no graven image is brought into the Temple, we have money changers to change our coins into special temple coins, ones that don't have images on them.

Those are the tables that Jesus turned that day. Some have said through the years that the money changers cheated. They cheated us folks from the country who may not know any better. They say that is what Jesus was upset about, the injustice and practices of those changers. That may be, but I think Jesus was up to something far bigger than calling out a few cheats.

The other Gospel writers place Jesus coming into the Temple at the end of Jesus' ministry. For Matthew, Mark and Luke it happened the day after Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in what you all know as Palm Sunday. The commotion that Jesus stirs in the Temple was yet another reason for the religious leaders to try to silence Jesus. However, for John, it is at the very beginning of his ministry. It is after the wedding feast in Cana, where Jesus' first miracle was recorded, and what a miracle that was turning water into fine wine!

You have to admit that Jesus' first two actions in John really got people's attention. First some good wine and then going to the Temple and turning the tables over! Whenever it took place, it did not make the religious leaders look good. Where the gospel writers place this Temple act, they did so for strategic purposes to get their message of Jesus across. For John it was an act to show what Jesus' ministry is about. Jesus is about to upend things!

But getting back to the rest of us ordinary folks, going to the Temple was a high point, not only because it was on a hill. We did not get there every year so it was a very special trip to make. It was a time to gather to

identify as God's children and it was a time to pray and yes to make our sacrifice.

After the Temple tax gets paid, the next thing is to buy an animal for the sacrifice. It is easier to wait and buy it at the Temple than to bring the animal all the way from our homes.

Sacrifice, now that is a can of worms... I know the concept of sacrifice has gotten a lot of thought over the years. The non-Jews see the sacrifice as a necessity to appease the gods that they followed before they learned about our one true God. One interpretation of what Jesus did when he turned those tables was to dismiss the act of sacrificing animals. In his death, he sacrificed himself to appease our God. Does God need to be appeased by death?

We Jews see sacrifice a bit differently. We have two ways of looking at sacrifice. The first is that we offer a sacrifice as a gift. Our ancestors, who were nomadic, did this when they reached their destination, when God brought them safely to a new place. It is out of gratitude that we offer a gift to God. When the offering time comes around in your worship time, you give some of your every hard-earned money to the church or to a good cause not to appease God but to thank God. You don't expect the heavens to open up and angels to sing your glory. You do so because you are thankful for your life, for the direction God has given you and you want to make a difference. The animals do not suffer. They are not expected to replace the sin we have committed. We are grateful to a God who loves us and calls us God's own.

That is an important distinction. Over the years Gentiles, and later Christians, interpreting that Jesus overturned the tables and scattered the animals waiting to be sacrificed, saw that Jesus's suffering was a sacrifice that took the place of our sins. Jesus replaced the animals so that God is appeased. But that is not how the Jews see it. When we look

at Jesus's death as a sacrifice we Jews see what Jesus did as a gift. A gift so that we, we ordinary clumsy human beings will not have to die. Humans did the worse thing possible; they tried to destroy God when they put Jesus on the cross. In spite of their best efforts, God was not defeated. Wow! God did not need Jesus to die to make us right. God chose this path because nothing can defeat God not even death itself.

The second way we regard a sacrifice is as a meal. The goats and lambs are killed and some are eaten. They are not consumed fully by fire but are used in the cycle of life. What does Jesus do but establish the meal that is right here before us, so that we can be joined together. This meal is not meant to be consumed alone. We come together in a meal to give thanks. We see that we eat the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation.

The word sacred comes from the word sacrifice. So, what was happening is special, reserved for the occasions of high honor. What we do here is sacred, just as what we do in the Temple. This is a meal worthy of being sacred, being special.

But back to that day when Jesus came into the Temple area and disrupted the flow of what has always been. We know Jesus was ushering in a new way but he did it with an old technique. All of our prophets were teachers, and to make their points memorable they made statements through their actions. Hosea married a harlot to show God's faithfulness even with the unfaithful Israel. Jeremiah bought land after every one was exiled, which on the surface makes no sense, but is a message of God's hope for what is to come. Jesus enters the Temple which is a place that the people care about deeply. In no uncertain terms he shows that things are changing. Jesus does not tear down the faith of the people, he does not lead them away from God, but in this action, he is showing that there is a reordering of how we relate to God.

Later Jesus would go to the synagogue to teach and say he is the light of the world. Later he would tell the folks who knew his family and saw him grow up that he came from the Father in heaven. Later, he would feed the crowds with very little and forgive the woman ready to be stoned. In this Gospel, his entire ministry is ahead of him. But you can be sure when he came into town people would say, “This is the one who turned the tables in the Temple.” Let’s hear what he has to say.

Jesus, in his taking on the establishment of the Jewish spiritual life, was not about to destroy it. He came to reclaim it. He dramatically showed them that by paying your tribute or offering your gift for the sake of custom was not enough. Here in this Temple is a place to know God. He was going to help all who would listen relate to God who is a parent and who loves and will do anything for their children.

What is your lesson for today? Sometimes, what is good and true and has been established, needs to be rethought and even needs to be upended. Continuing as we always have whether it be in the church or in matters such as our environment or how we see and respond to each other, needs to be *upended*. Sometimes our heart has been lost in our tradition or our culture or our complacency. What might have worked and was meaningful is reduced to simple catch phrases and reactive arguments.

If you could only have been there, believe me you would never forget it. But you are hearing this many years later. As you take the bread today and sip from the cup, remember Jesus’ sacrifice is a gift to you so that you can be close to God. Jesus brings us into this relationship that is based on love not obligation or appeasement. It can’t get much better than that. Thanks be to God. Amen.