

January 16 sermon - Cleansing the Temple

All of the gospels make it pretty clear from the get-go what Jesus is going to be up against. In Matthew's gospel, in only chapter two we start off with the Magi. It's a lovely story that gives us lots of inaccurate nativity scenes with wisemen at the stable with the shepherds. But the story also introduces us to King Herod. The wisemen were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and tell him where the baby was.

Paranoid and enraged by their trickery, the story tells us that Herod had all the male babies in Bethlehem younger than two years killed.

Mark's gospel shows repeated conflicts between Jesus and the pharisees and scribes right from the beginning.

In Luke, both Mary's song and the song of old Simeon hint at the conflict between Jesus and the powerful rulers. But then, he preached his first sermon in Nazareth – to the people he grew up with no less, ordinary people – and they wanted to throw him off a cliff. It seems like everyone is against him.

John puts this scene very early in his gospel. The other gospels put this scene towards the end – when Jesus enters Jerusalem right before his arrest.

But John puts it here – at the beginning. It has a little different flavor than the beginning of the other gospels, too. At the beginning of the other gospels, you end up siding totally with Jesus – Herod wants to kill an innocent baby out of fear he'll lose power. Mark and Luke have Jesus saying something that people find offensive – but we who know how the story ends are totally on board with Jesus. But what about this one? This is a little different.

Before we delve into this scene, I want to say a word about John's terminology. In John's gospel, Jesus' opponents are typically called "the Jews." This has led to centuries of Christian antisemitism and persecution of the Jews.

When John uses the term the Jews, he is not talking about the ordinary Jews. Jesus and his disciples are ordinary Jews. John's audience is likely a congregation of Jews who have been kicked out of the synagogue because they believe Jesus is the Messiah the Jews have been waiting for.

When John uses the Jews, he is talking about the Jewish religious leaders – the powerful leaders who were all too often dependent on cooperation with Rome to maintain their own power.

OK, next let's take a look at what's going on in the Temple. First, this activity was all normal. Sacrifices and grain and animal offerings were key to Temple worship. The laws way back from books like Leviticus still shaped Temple worship and sacrifice at the time of Jesus.

All Jewish people were supposed to go to the Temple in Jerusalem once a year to offer their sacrifices. The Temple marketplace was set up to make this easier for travelers. They could come to Jerusalem, exchange their local currency for Temple currency, and then buy whatever animal they intended to sacrifice.

Literally nobody thought there was anything wrong with this. It just made sense. It's how they'd been doing it for a long time. The Temple depended on this economic structure. What on earth could Jesus be so mad about? In the other three gospels, Jesus says the Temple has become a den of thieves.

He doesn't say that here – he says simply do not make my father's house a marketplace. To not allow things to keep on this way means the Temple can't survive.

Which ends up being the point. The Temple had been the most tangible presence of God for the Jewish people. Jesus would change all that. No longer would the Temple be needed for people to experience the presence of God. Jesus is the presence of God.

This passage isn't just about changing Temple practices. It's a complete upending of what had previously been known. I think that's why John puts it at the beginning. With a crash and the crack of the whip cords striking the air, tables overturning, animals bleating and squawking, metal coins clattering, Jesus announces that everything is turning upside down.

Mary's song in Luke is perhaps one of the most loved passages in the Bible, and Canticum of the Turning is a beloved version of that. What Jesus did in the Temple is what that song looks like, acted out. When Jesus invited us to come and see, it turns out that some of what we will see will bother us. This Jesus jars us.

But then, the upending of long held beliefs, traditions, and systems is jarring. This scene maybe gives us a little bit more sense of just how earth-shattering it is for God to appear as a human being. And how very different is the kingdom of God from what we too often value.

As a text for the weekend of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, you could hardly do better. One of the sites I use for sermon prep had a link to an interview Martin Luther King, Jr. gave in 1967, after both the Civil Rights Act and Voting rights act were passed. It's a fascinating interview in which he talks about the persistence of racism and racial inequality even after those acts.

He made a great many points that still stand true today. One of his main points was that the early successes in the Civil Rights Movement ultimately didn't really cost whites anything. Integration of lunch counters and public transit systems generally helped businesses.

And as much as it was resisted, ensuring voting rights ultimately didn't cost whites anything, at least not financially. But the next phase of the Civil Rights movement he said, included things that would actually end racial inequality. And the opposition would be fierce, because those actions would actually cost the nation in real dollars.

Dr. King's I Have a Dream speech is almost universally loved by anyone who doesn't consider themselves a white supremacist. But some of the other things he said made clear that perhaps the biggest obstacle once the blatant racism of legal segregation in the south was ended was the white moderate Christians who worried about doing too much too fast.

King upturned tables. Many white Christians weren't ready for such table turning, even though we have a pretty good model in Jesus. And many still aren't. But if almighty God is going to be present among us in Jesus, we're going to have to expect some table turning. And it won't be comfortable.

Some of those tables will be the same as the tables King talked about. In the interview, Dr. King talked about the need for a revolution of values in our nation. A revolution of values...I like that. Honestly, that's probably something that has been needed nearly everywhere and in all times.

Jesus did more than turn over some tables. He upended the whole religious system of the time. The values of the Kingdom of God he brought truly were a revolution of values. Those values were always the ones God's people were to live, but the Temple system had become a place that missed the mark.

Instead of caring for the poor and vulnerable and living in peace, the Temple system had come to look a little too much like the Roman Empire. It became an institution that was too wedded to the Empire. Instead of being a critique of Rome's oppressive and often violent power, the Jewish religious authorities were more focused on self-preservation and maintaining the status quo.

Problem is, a few hundred years later the Christian Church did the same thing. And too often still does. When the church is more about a particular partisan political ideology than about living by the values of the Kingdom of God, it too needs a little table turning. When expressions of certain Christians somehow wrap the American flag and the Bible up together, some table turning needs to happen.

This week's come and see invitation invites you to pay attention to where tables are being overturned – where that revolution of values is happening. As you start looking for those places, here's a clue – they might be things that bother you, that make you uncomfortable – sort of like this image of Jesus chasing out the poor blokes just trying to do their job.

Where do you see systems that exploit people being overturned? Where do you see the struggle for racial equality happen? Where do you see people working for peaceful solutions to problems – solutions that show care and compassion for all God's people? Where do you see work that helps families rise from poverty? Where do you see new ideas for a better way to do health care so that healing is available to all?

And what tables might you be called to overturn?