

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 1: 10-17
SECOND LESSON: John 2:13-22
March 3, 2024
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

“Turning the Tables”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

This is one of my favorite true stories about turning the tables. It actually took place in Charlotte, North Carolina.

A lawyer once purchased a box of very rare and expensive cigars. Then he insured them against, among other things, fire.

Within a month, he of course had smoked his entire box of expensive cigars, so the lawyer then filed a claim against the insurance company. In his claim, the lawyer stated the cigars were lost “in a series of small fires.” The insurance company refused to pay, citing the obvious reason, that the man had consumed the cigars in the normal fashion.

But the lawyer sued and WON! When delivering the ruling, the judge agreed with the insurance company that the claim was frivolous, but stated nevertheless, that the lawyer held a policy from the company, in which it had warranted that the cigars were insurable and also guaranteed that it would insure them against fire, without defining what is considered to be unacceptable fire, and was obligated to pay the claim.

Rather than endure a lengthy and costly appeal process, the insurance company accepted the ruling and paid \$15,000 to the lawyer for his loss of the cigars that perished in the fires. After the lawyer cashed the check, however, the insurance company then had him arrested on 24 counts of ARSON. With his own insurance claim and testimony from the previous case used against him, the lawyer was convicted of intentionally burning his insured property and was sentenced to 24 months in jail and a \$24,000 fine.

Don't you wish people like this always had the tables turned on them in such a neat and tidy way?

Today's story is about Jesus turning the tables on corrupt actors, literally. There is one little problem with the story we should get rid of right away, however. It's a problem that makes people who believe in literal biblical inerrancy have a nervous breakdown. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus cleanses the temple at the end of his ministry shortly before his crucifixion. In John's gospel this takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. *Who's right?* I'm going to go with Matthew, Mark and Luke. John's gospel is much more interested in theology than historical correctness.

There, now that we have that dealt with, we can get on to what's really important—the story itself.

The population of Jerusalem was normally in the range of between 60,000 and 80,000, at the time of Jesus, so, think Scranton PA or Wilmington DE. Upper Darby, believe it or not, is slightly too large. It's about 85,000 people when we include Drexel Hill. Now imagine that Scranton or Wilmington is entirely surrounded by a very high wall with seven entrance gates. Then add two million visitors coming to City Hall for a big festival. There are people EVERYWHERE. There's even half a million more camped outside of the walls. And at the center of the action where everyone wants to be, it's standing room only.

Now let's switch to a world in which the civil authority and the religious authority are the same thing and pretty much everyone is corrupt. Moneychangers and people selling animals for sacrifice were a necessity for Temple goers. Only Tyrian currency was acceptable in the Temple, so people had to exchange their normal currency. Animals had to be from the region and perfect and without blemish. If you tried bringing your own, you would invariably be told yours wasn't good enough and to go buy one. But originally all of this buying and exchanging of money took place outside of the Temple in the Kidron Valley. When Caiaphas became high priest, however, he moved his cronies into the Court of the Gentiles, the outermost court of the Temple and charged them rent for the spaces. It was quite lucrative. And so much more convenient!

Jesus would have had to push and shove his way into the Temple along with everyone else. There he saw what he expected—merchants selling oxen, sheep and doves at a high profit. Moneychangers sitting at tables exchanging currency at a dishonest rate that always made them a hefty profit. A place of worship was full of men hawking wares and animals. The noise, smell and crowds would have been overwhelming. The sacrificial system itself would have turned our stomachs. Adding a loud commercial enterprise made it intolerable.

Jesus was having none of it. But we have to understand that the Temple was **absolutely enormous**. We have this Sunday School image in our minds of Jesus throwing everyone out of a space like a really big church building. But that's not what happened. Jesus couldn't possibly have reached everyone. The Temple complex was 450 acres, or 25 football fields large. A lot of people would not have even known what was going on. Only a small percentage of the vendors would have gotten tossed—the ones within reach. Jesus braided a whip of cords and drove out all of the animals within range. He tossed the tables of the nearby money changers upside down, literally turning the tables on them. In John's gospel he said "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market! (Or literally a "house of commerce") In Matthew, Mark and Luke Jesus also accuses them of making the temple into a "den of robbers." The corruption was at every level. Caiaphas may have claimed that the rent money went to the upkeep of the Temple, but we can rest assured a lot of it went straight into his pocket.

Can we just stop and imagine for a minute how much chaos Jesus would have caused in one corner of an already chaotic place? Furious money changers would have been cursing him out and scrambling to find their lost coins. Panicked animals would have started running away, their stall keepers

chasing after them. It may have only been one part of the Temple that Jesus affected, but it was notable, so notable in fact that the authorities were quickly summoned.

It is unfortunate that John's gospel was written so late that the author made no distinction between various groups within Judaism at the time and simply wrote that "the Jews responded to him." That could be anyone, and it wasn't just anyone. It was Caiaphas' representatives who showed up to demand that Jesus provide some clearly miraculous sign giving him the authority to do what he did. Of course, Jesus had no official permission to do any of this. And as for divine authority, he responded, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

There are different words for Temple. This confrontation took place in the larger temple complex, specifically the Court of the Gentiles. There was another word for the Temple sanctuary where it was believed God dwelled. Jesus used the second word here. This is significant, because as the disciples later realized, Jesus was not actually talking about a Temple made of stone but his physical body, which was also the place where God dwelt.

The Temple hierarchy took Jesus' words literally, of course. They took him so literally that we can say for certain this event took place around the year 27 or 28 by calculating when Herod started building the Temple, 46 years earlier. Of course this was an impossible challenge. No one was going to destroy the Temple in order to see what Jesus would do.

When Jesus turned the tables that day, literally overthrowing the merchants making a profit in the Temple courts he made enemies. He was also misunderstood. And later, when dragged before Pilate his words were twisted and used against him. This is the hard part about following Christ. We don't want to make enemies, or be misunderstood, or be misquoted and attacked. But whenever we confront power where it lives, this will happen. Evil and corruption does not politely give way. It never admits wrong or takes responsibility. These are things that good people do.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." We don't have to go looking for this. It will come to us. Our job as the body of Christ is to boldly call out the injustices and corruption when we see it, knowing that everything that came Jesus' way will come our way too. If we're honest, that terrifies us. But no servant is better than their master, and in Lent more than any other time we should be aware of that. If we are faithful and start turning over tables, opposition will come. Amen.

Isaiah 1: 10-17

¹⁰ Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the instruction of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

11 “The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the Lord.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
12 When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.
14 Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals
I hate with all my being.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.
Your hands are full of blood!
16 Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.
17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

John 2:13-22

13 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 15 So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” 17 His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”
18 The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”
19 Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”
20 They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” 21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

