

Good morning, I am really glad to get the chance to speak with you this morning. And many thanks to those who worked the tech to enable me to speak with you. And on such an important day. You might not think of it as an important day, that's okay. But I look forward to it. Today in the lectionary is what I call Table Flipping Sunday. This is angry Jesus Sunday. This is love your neighbor AND some things cannot be tolerated Sunday. This is stand up for what you believe in Sunday. So, before I talk about the background to this scene in the temple, I want to plant a question: What would you overturn tables for? Think about this. I'm coming back to it.

But first, a little background. Who was in the temple, and what were they doing? The commonly accepted explanation for who these moneychangers were and why there were sheep and cattle is this: people made pilgrimages to the Temple to offer sacrifice and to pay their temple tax, which was the money that allowed the temple to continue to function. Sacrifices had to be young and blemish-less, and a temple industry grew up around procuring and selling sacrifice-able animals to the people who came to the Temple. Likewise, the temple tax could only be paid in a certain currency, and Jews would come from far and wide to sacrifice at the Temple, and needed to change their money into the accepted local currency.

So why drive out the animals and overturn the tables? One of the things we see over and over again in the life of Christ is how strongly he feels about places where cultural traditions have calcified in such a way as to rob religious acts of their true significance. For example, Jesus heals on the Sabbath, and the religious authorities will criticize him for doing work on the day of rest. In Matthew, he will reply: "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

So what is Jesus angry about here? He states, "Stop making my father's house a marketplace" or more precisely from the Greek, "a house of trading, or of exchange" or in Greek the house of emporiou, which, you can probably hear, is where we get the English word "emporium." So this on the face of it could be a problem: temple as emporium.

Now, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century commentator Origen of Alexandria thought this passage was a metaphor for the soul of a person being cleansed from its attachment to earthly things, and this metaphorical interpretation recurs a fair bit in the history of the interpretation of this passage. And

honestly, I don't find it a bad one: several times Jesus will note that attachment to earthly things, rather than things of God, is a stumbling block to a relationship with God.

However, other interpretations are more common now. One of the most common, and the one I remember learning as a child, that Jesus was offended at the mere presence of mercantile transactions in the temple, but contemporary commentator William Herzog suggests that it's projecting backwards a sense of religion that would be foreign to the ancient world: if sacrifice was required at the temple, then all the "support services required" to make the sacrifices would have been normal, and likely, non-controversial. It would be illogical if a religion set up a requirement and then made it excessively difficult to fulfil it. This interpretation, if we follow it out to its logical conclusion, might suggest that pledging to the church and putting money in the plate for the support of the community is also a problem, which might be why this reading doesn't come around on pledge Sunday? So it would seem that there would have to be something more than just the presence of trade to inspire this level of anger.

So, Herzog also offers an interpretation new to me, but quite compelling. Because of the temple tax, the temple was a very wealthy institution. Both the priestly families and the lay aristocracy that surrounded the temple controlled a great deal of money. Put another way, Herzog writes, "The temple cleansing cannot be divorced from the role of the temple as a bank." The temple either from its own treasury or on behalf of wealthy aristocrats, loaned money to the poor, who were gradually falling deeper into debt, as what we might now call "predatory lending" targeted peasants who were on the verge of losing their land (or we might say "foreclosure") while the rich were investing money to make yet more money ("which we might call "shareholder dividends" at the risk of also projecting too much of modern economics backwards.). Herzog highlights that during this time, income inequality was growing, relationships between debtors and creditors were breaking down, and the consolidation of wealth to the affluent few in society was causing problems. He concludes that it was "no accident that one of the first acts of the First Jewish Revolt in 66 C.E. Was the burning of the debt records in the archives in Jerusalem." In this interpretation, Jesus' action was closer to "Occupy Wall Street" than it was to Origen's spiritual purification.

So these are some ideas about why Jesus was motivated to overturn tables.

At this point, I pause before moving into the question I started with, when WE might overturn tables. I feel compelled to note something else important about the interpretation of this passage. From the time of St. Augustine, this passage has been used to justify some truly horrific acts of violence by Christians. While the earliest Christians maintained the Jesus was absolutely non-violent when it came to people at first (note that he drives out the animals, and overturns the tables of the people), this passage has been used, among other things, to justify the Crusades, and a range of violence against people with ideological differences. I believe that violence against those who disagree with you is not only wrong on the face of it, but also a terrible misinterpretation of this passage. I bring it up because it is important to confront the good and the bad in the history of Christian thought. “When would you turn over tables?” is not the same question as “when would you commit violence against other people?”.

Regardless of which interpretation we adopt about what was the wrong being done in the courtyard of the temple, I think we can agree that Jesus is passionately and angrily standing up against what he sees as wrong. And I will say out loud: I relish it. This is the Jesus that reminds us that being demure, retiring, mild, going along to get along are not absolute Christian virtues. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, yes... AND sometimes you have to turn over some tables.

In honor of Table Flipping Sunday, I’m going to do something I have never before done in a homily: Quote some random person from the internet. Because sometimes someone reconfigures a thing in just a way to make it hit in a new way. On twitter I read: “Ancestors, forgive me for the times I desired a seat at a table you would’ve flipped.” I think that our twitter user has given us a remarkably good framework for our action. When do we want a seat at the table, and when is it time to flip the table over? A seat at the table: We know that Jesus sat at table with friends. We know that Jesus sat at table with outcasts and sinners—people with no power, the marginalized of society. We also know that Jesus sat at table with tax collectors and Pharisees—the people with significant power. So when do we try for a seat at the table, and when do we flip over the table?

So here we are: What **would** you flip a table for? For injustice? For dishonesty? For corruption? For exploitation? To save a life? To save a soul?

Most people who are hearing this question are watching via Facebook. And so I'm going to ask you to take a moment and think about this question, and then write something into the comments. What tables do you see that need flipping over?

Where is injustice so pervasive that sitting with those in power at the table is not going to cut it?

What needs shaking up so badly that you are not afraid of the clatter of coins falling to the floor?

That you would use your body to create change?

What drives you out into the streets in protest?

What **will** you flip a table for?

Amen.

- [Exodus 20:1-17](#)
- [1 Corinthians 1:18-25](#)
- [John 2:13-22](#)
- [Psalm 19](#)



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