

Flipping the Tables

a sermon

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John 2:13–22

Well, that's an interesting Bible passage!

By interesting, yeah, I mean different, I mean odd, I mean “what in the world is going on here?”

Because the picture of Jesus we see in these verses can be comforting, assuring, giving one hope. And it can also be disturbing, challenging, making one wonder.

Jesus goes to the temple. What he sees there disturbs him. He didn't exactly flip out. But he did start flipping the tables. He overturns the tables,

the tables with coins,
the tables with receipts,
the tables with calculators and financial apps
(okay, maybe not those) —

he flips the tables that moneychangers were using

to exchange Roman money for temple money,
gentile cash for kosher currency,
the coins of empire for shekels of Jerusalem, the holy city.

Jesus, with anger, with righteous indignation, he makes a whip out of cords lying about and he flails it about to chase people right out of the temple.

Disturbing.

Or comforting.

Which is it? Which is it for you?

These different reactions to this picture of Jesus can happen even for the same person, perhaps even for you. It is possible to like *and* dislike the picture, to be comforted *and* disturbed.

It's a comfort: that Jesus got angry. That he, *too*, got angry.

Against all those who have told us,

or hinted to us,
or modeled for us,
or maybe we have told ourselves

that it's wrong to get angry,

that anger is a bad thing,
a sinful thing,

this message getting internalized into a well-practiced habit

of stuffing anger,
of hiding it,
of concealing it,

where it can do no harm (until it explodes, or causes a host of physical and mental problems)

...

against all that, this picture of Jesus giving vent to his anger suggests

that maybe anger in and of itself *isn't* bad,
that maybe there is such a thing as *good anger*,
that maybe the sin lies not in emotion,
 but in action,
 in motivation,
 in direction.

Not the passion itself, but the thing about which one is passionate, ah, maybe in that we can find the difference between bad anger and good.

So that may be the *comfort* we get from the picture of Jesus we see in this passage. But what we see may also be *disturbing*.

Where's the love of Jesus? Where's his peace, his calm? This angry Jesus disturbs, it discomforts. Oh, let's have back our peaceful Jesus, our smiling Jesus. (Never mind that such a Jesus is more a product of our imagination and our wishful thinking than a true and truthful representation of our Lord.)

That may be what's disturbing. But there's more. Oh, definitely more. Because what is the object of Jesus' anger? Against what, or whom, does he direct his wrath?

A place of worship, and those leading worship.

An institution of religion, and its practices, its traditions, ... its *business*.

Ah, yes, its business. What was going on in the temple that day, just like any other day, was not just religion but the *business* of religion.

Religion is good. Or, it can be. It should be. That's what I believe. I think religion is good and important. I don't buy what some people claim, what even a good many Christians claim, that Christianity is not a religion but a faith.

Of course it is. Of course it is a religion. It has the shape and form and characteristics of a religion. Doctrinally, liturgically, sociologically, it is a religion.

I don't agree with those who claim that Christianity is good as long as it remains a pure faith in Jesus Christ but gets corrupted once it becomes "religious" or "a religion."

Faith in Jesus, once it becomes self-aware, it quite readily, naturally, adopts the things of the Christian tradition, its structures and traditions and practices and liturgies and teachings. It *needs* these "religious" things, these things of religion. It needs them in order to give itself, to give that faith, shape and order. Faith in Jesus needs these to help it deepen and grow. It needs these to help it express itself outwardly. Or maybe it doesn't so much "need" these, but it naturally, inevitably, reasonably, blessedly draws on them as it becomes more true to itself, and more true to Christ.

Really, now: you can't tell me that those who believe in Jesus will automatically, inevitably become *worse* Christians just by being religious. Very often, the structures of religion help

them to be better Christians, more devoted to Jesus, more capable of acting in accord with his good news.

But we've got admit: religion can go bad. The tables can get flipped:
The needs of institutions over the care of souls.

The preservation of budgets and buildings rather than the feeding of the physically and spiritually hungry.

The cultivation and propagation of dead rituals instead of the nurture of those who are no longer capable of understanding them.

The keeping of secrets and the hiding of skeletons rather than justice and liberation and truth for those who have been denied these.

The support and celebration of a nation or a political outlook or of the leaders who represent these rather than the worship of the Lord God whose mercy is not confined by the borders we draw and before whom all rulers will eventually bow.

When religion goes bad,

when it gets in the way,
when it becomes a means of hiding from Jesus
 rather than a place in which to encounter him,
when it is used to enrich oneself or to justify one's enrichment
 while ignoring or even compounding the plight of the poor,
when Christian faith doesn't just *have* its business
 but instead has *become* "a business"

then Jesus is denied, he is rejected, his good news is sullied, and his self-giving is mocked.

What made Jesus so animated that day was a corruption of worship. It was a blatant enrichment of some enabled by the institution of religion. It was the worship of the god of profit in that place where the one true God is to be worshiped.

Can't we see how wrong that is? Sure we can. And yet, sometimes we, too, go a little askew.

Sometimes we mistake our self-interest for God's interests.

Sometimes we become so focused on the business of our religious institutions that we forget the ends those institutions are really supposed to serve.

Sometimes we are more concerned with the *self-preservation* of the church than the *integrity* of the church.

And when that happens, then I suspect Jesus would like to flip *our* tables.

This really is that love and mercy and kindness we might have missed, that we had wanted, but much deeper and truer than we expected. Because Jesus so often comes into our lives — don't you feel it? — flipping the tables we had erected,

tables we use to separate ourselves from others,
tables of division,
tables of self-interest,
tables that look shiny and clean
 but that have our fingerprints,
 sticky with our sin,
 grimy with our guilt.

Jesus comes in and starts flipping the tables we had set up, the tables at which we smugly sit, the tables of our pride, and our fear.

He does this again and again.
He does this because he loves his heavenly Father.
He does this because he loves us.
He does this out of mercy and compassion.

He does this, because those tables both show and enable our corruption, and we are best rid of them.

I know this to be true, and maybe you do, too: believing in Jesus means having your tables flipped a lot.

And that's a good and blessed thing.
Let us welcome and adore this loving and righteous Jesus, who upends and reorders the furniture of our souls.