

## Turning the Tables

March 3, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: John 2: 13-22*

I had a remarkable dinner conversation last weekend with a friend who is a writer and scholar. He's recently been studying and spending time in alternative, intentional communities all around the world, learning with and from people who are making radical decisions about how to spend their days and money, and who are finding deep connection with the land, sourcing much of their own food, and reinvigorating age-old practices for sustaining themselves and the earth. As we were exploring where we were finding hope these days, he surprised me by raising some recent ponderings about John the Baptist. Granted, in an earlier life, my friend was a church goer and a New Testament professor but still I was surprised he went there of all places. He lifted up John as an exemplar who was able to live off the land and build an alternative community. As in maybe John wasn't eating all that locust and honey and wearing camel skin like we read about because he was some deranged eccentric. Instead, maybe he was a first century naturalist, a survivalist of sorts, someone living intentionally "off the grid," as we'd say today, someone who had a vision worthy of inspiring Jesus to follow him.

He then shared something I found timely for this season of Lent. You see, just before Jesus entered *his* own 40-day season of prayer and spiritual reckoning in that desert wilderness, he and many like him found themselves standing knee-deep in the Jordan river for a baptism that John was offering. And "why were they there?" my friend asked me. Why venture into the wilderness to be baptized, to repent and to be cleansed of their sin as was the custom at the time? In other words, why in that muddy river and not at the Jerusalem Temple, which is where we find Jesus in our scripture today? Why walk for days into a desert to be led by a wild man? My friend patiently waited for a response and then it dawned me. It's because it was an alternative! They wanted and needed an alternative! The way they had been living, their necks under the boot of the brutal Roman Empire, and within the context of the priestly cult that ran the temple, it wasn't working anymore. It had gotten too entangled, too violent, an unjust regime that consolidated power at the top and exploited everyone else. Maybe they were taken to and by the river because they knew their spiritual and material survival depended on it! Maybe they were hungry, willing if not wanting to cultivate and eat some locusts and honey of their own! As my friend put it, they needed to walk away from "things as they were" and towards "things as they were becoming!" They chose to

immerse themselves in that river of an alternative, beloved community, and in an alternative reality to what they had known all their lives. It makes sense. John the Baptist and Jesus were all about manifesting an intentional, alternative community, rooted and grounded in God's love, justice and joy, one that offered a radical departure from the "world as it is" and in invitation to live and thrive in the "world as God intended it to be!"

With all of that said, let's turn to our lectionary appointed text for today, John, chapter 2. It's sometimes called "The Cleansing of the Temple." Most of us remember it more colloquially as "that one time when Jesus was *pissed!*" You laugh but this passage is serious. We're caught off guard by the unexpected nature of Jesus's whip-cracking, table-overturning anger. And this leaves us with at least two temptations. First, there's the dangerous move of thinking we should immediately align Jesus's righteous anger with our own and apply its full force to our contemporary causes! Jesus turned the tables on the temple floors. We should do the same on House and Senate or Wall Street trading floors. Money changers = bad! Jesus and us = good! Let's not go there. Not today, at least. Second, and if we're being honest, there's something strangely thrilling about seeing Jesus this angry, something that humanizes him. It's something that could, if I let it, make me feel better about what I said this week to the oblivious Harvard kid who almost mowed me down with his motorized scooter! We think we can catch Jesus in the act here, behaving in ways unfit for one with the title "The Prince of Peace." 'Ha-ha! Angry Jesus! I see you!' But let's not go there either. If we look and listen carefully, the anger in this passage isn't really the point! Instead we should be asking what is the anger pointing to?

Some quick context. The text tells us it was Passover, which meant that Jews from all over Israel, Jesus and his followers included, were gathering at the Temple to complete their obligatory annual pilgrimage, to pay homage and to make sacrifices to the God of Israel. Jesus wouldn't have been surprised to see the moneychangers or merchants there in the outer court where our passage is set. The moneychangers were exchanging Roman coins for Temple currency since use of the Roman coins was forbidden by Jewish law within the Temple. And the merchants? They weren't merely pushing wares trying to turn a buck. They were selling the animals -sheep, cattle, doves - so that all the pilgrims could have something "unblemished" to sacrifice for their sins! They played a necessary role in helping the Jews to keep the laws concerning the Temple.

Here's another bit of context. You see once through those outer courts, at the heart of the Temple, and in its innermost sanctuary, was the place known as the Holy of Holies. And, at the center of this inner sanctum was the *kapporeth* or "mercy seat." It was a slab of gold that rested on top of the Ark of the Covenant. The ancient Jews believed that this golden slab, this mercy seat, was nothing less than the throne of God, the very dwelling place of the Most High! There were no statues here, no images or idols, just still and empty space – a divine and holy void shrouded in sheer mystery. The space was entrusted to the sole care of the High Priest and even he could only go in once a year. The Holy of Holies should have been the prize in the mind's eyes of all the Passover pilgrims. They might not get it to see it for themselves, but . . . to have proximity to it, to breathe in the nearby air, to absorb its holy aura, that's why they were there. In stark contrast to these private and innermost parts of the Temple, the scene in the outer courts, with all the people and animals, undoubtedly began to look more like a busy open-air market than a temple, noisy, even chaotic. Walking through the Temple gates, entering into the dwelling place of the one he called "father," Jesus' keen mind must have sensed the intrusion of all that unholy and loud commotion. I've imagined it being like a trip to the Louvre or the Grand Canyon, say, where people spend more time in the gift shop than they do basking in all the beauty that is literally steps away! It's enough to make you angry, right?

Still, why all the fierce, whip-cracking level drama in this passage? I have a theory! I think Jesus saw a moment of opportunity for a little first century street theater. This was no temper tantrum. He wasn't out-of-control rage-y here! Far from it. Though his anger was intense, it was also intentional, and he knew well the impact it would have. After all, remember, his call was to lead people into an alternative reality, and to create an alternative spiritual community, that was emerging not only out in the wilderness, but also right there in the heart of Temple, in the heart of the city, right where all those seats of power, of religious and political authority were crowding out room for the one seat that mattered - the seat of God's mercy!

Jesus was teaching here. He was showing them another way, like John showed him, a vision of a world turned upside down, centered on God's love, under God's big tent which has room for everyone! Can't we see him saying to the crowd: "Don't you know where you are, how close you are standing to God's presence. This is your chance and just look at yourselves jockeying, running and scurrying about. Truth to tell, you don't need money or even animals, you don't even need the temple. If I have to I'll tear the whole thing down and will build you another one in a few days. Better still, let my body be for you the

temple and sacrifice - a sacrifice to end the whole pattern of sacrificial violence - let it rise up after three days, and I'll set forth a new thing that God is already doing, a new community, a new table with space and grace for all. He was breaking the world as it is din and noise to point to an entirely new and different way of being!

This afternoon, at least 70 of us will join forces with over 1700 members of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. I dare say we will all be players in a bit of revolutionary street theater of our own, thanks to a team of wise and gifted organizers, including Phil Jones, Will Erickson and Casey Marsh, who have planned virtually every minute of the afternoon for maximum impact! I invite us to watch for how GBIO turns the tables on the powers that be and points to an alternative vision, a new reality of affordable housing for all that boldly walks away from “the way things are” and insists on “the way things are becoming” when we work together with God! For those many who are going, a few things in particular you might expect to see and hear:

1. Enter into that gorgeous Roxbury Mosque and remember it is first and foremost a house of prayer! And prepare to pray and sing together with a wonderfully diverse gathering of our siblings from many faiths and cultures. That is an alternative community and a vastly alternative coming together our world desperately needs right now!
2. You might well hear some righteous anger about the lack of affordable housing in this state! Consider its source - the expertise of people's stories which is as powerful as any number crunching or data! I learned from a community organizer once that the word for anger is rooted in the Norse word for grief! We feel them both when something is missing, something is lost, something is not right with “the world as it is.” Watch how people's grief and anger channel divine energy that points to and co-creates “the world as it should be!”
3. Consider the alternative reality that GBIO is calling for and manifesting - housing justice for all! And notice the hope I know you will feel in your belly from being there in the very presence of God and so many others working in common purpose, come what may! That hope is the only way forward!

Whether you are joining us today or not, I invite you to tend to whatever moments of your own grief and anger you may be feeling now. Tend to them as you would an invitation! An invitation to break away from your “world as it is,” and whatever daily patterns are feeding it, and break through to an alternative reality, relying on God's grace and on this alternate community. Your grief and anger at the ways things are may be just the invitation you need to immerse yourself ever more deeply into the river of faith community, where we can live with intense and radical intention, where there's housing and

healing and justice and joy abundant, enough for everyone. Friends, a new table is set for us even now!  
Amen!

