

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Tables Turned March 4, 2018

Once or twice a year I find that the clutter in my office has become so deep that I don’t even want to go in there. It can be a challenge to keep up with all the papers, books, magazines, and all the resources I use to do the work that I do. And it seems that at certain times there isn’t a space anywhere that doesn’t have something sitting on top of it. It is at those times that I know I need to clean my office and I am always amazed at how good that makes me feel. To see everything in its place and papers put away, floors vacuumed, and desktop dusted, makes me feel like I can get to work again, and my creativity often soars afterwards. After our February warm up it got me thinking about spring cleaning and so I spent a little time doing just that the last couple of weeks. Maybe you have a similar urge to start cleaning this time of year as Spring is beginning to look like it’s just around the corner.

It reminded me of our reading this morning when Jesus came into the temple and did a little Spring cleaning of his own. And wouldn’t you have loved to have been a fly on the temple wall to see how that all happened? Jesus with attitude! Turning over tables, scattering people and livestock, making bold and prophetic statements. One of the few times that we see Jesus being angry with folks. The Angry Jesus, is how he is often referred to in this passage. But I think there is every reason for him to be angry if we take a minute and understand some of the context.

Every Passover Jews from all over the empire would descend upon Jerusalem to make sacrifices of atonement for their sins and the sins of the nation. This is a complex system and one that we don’t have a lot of experience

with. Here is just a simple explanation offered by Pastor Melissa Baine Severe. She says, “Let’s reconstruct the scene. It’s Passover, that most important of Jewish feasts. Thousands of religious pilgrims are making their way to Jerusalem to worship at the temple and offer sacrifices. If worshipers can’t afford to bring a large animal, they can bring a pigeon. In addition, a half-shekel is expected as a temple tax. This tax must be paid in Jewish coin, because Roman coins have images of emperors or gods, and are therefore not permitted.

Inside the courtyard of the temple are people who will help you. Some are selling the animals you need for sacrifice, and others are exchanging your Roman coins for temple coins. Why does that make Jesus angry? Because it’s likely that those who are selling and exchanging, are in cahoots with corrupt priests.

Here’s how that would work: You might bring an animal from your own flocks or purchase one from your neighbor. The priests, who examine the animals (which are supposed to be “perfect”), may deem yours unacceptable. Then, if you want to keep your religious commitment, you need to buy one from a merchant inside the temple grounds. Those merchants charge more than what the animal is worth, and likely give a kickback to the priests. In a similar way, the money changers can charge pretty much any exchange rate they want, and they have a monopoly on the business.

This makes Jesus really, really mad. Merchants and priests alike are taking advantage of all worshipers, but especially the poor who can least afford it. You go to pray, and you are required to spend a lot of money to do so, to be acceptable to God with your sacrifice.”

Jesus gets really worked up when people or systems or organizations such as the religious system of his day make it difficult for people to come to God. When the synagogue or the church put obstacles in the way of people’s access to God by creating rules about right belief, right sacrifice, right clothing, right ways of worship, the color of your skin, your lifestyle, or your financial status, then you can bet Jesus is going to get riled up about that and so should you!

Jesus is going to turn over tables and cause a scene. He’s going to speak up and speak out! He’s going to remind us all that the ‘Temple’ is a place for all people. A place where all are welcome! A place of prayer and a place of safety. A place where God is found. Not a place to use your position to take advantage of those who are hungry for God. Jesus is going to speak out and act out in such a way that they will kill him for it! They will literally crucify him! That’s why John has this happening so early in his version of the Gospel. And that often happens to those who speak truth to power or challenge the status quo.

So, I guess one of the challenges for us today is to consider, what would Jesus be turning over in this sanctuary today? What tables would he be turning over in the sanctuary of your heart? Where have we become like that temple of old, restricting and creating obstacles for all those pilgrims who are hungry for the divine? Who want to come and be a part of the family, but they didn’t bring the right sacrifice? Who want to come and be restored in the love of the community of God, but they don’t meet your expectations or seem repentant enough. O, Yes, you can bet Jesus wants to come in and turn some things over if you are doing that. You want to see an angry Jesus, well, just get between him and one of his loved ones and you’ll find out what that braided cord was for! Jesus is like a mother bear and her cubs! You know what I’m talking about! But Jesus is also mad because he knows that there is no sacrifice that can put you right with God. He knows that he alone will be sufficient.

Theologian David Lose says, “John puts this story upfront because it reveals something crucial about who Jesus is: he is the Lamb of God, as John the Baptist said in the first chapter, who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). He is, to return a few verses earlier, the embodiment of “grace upon grace” (1:16). There is therefore no further need for sacrifice; Jesus’ incarnated, embodied grace suffices fully, wholly, entirely, and completely. Indeed, it may be that John the Evangelist is going so far as to say – to a community, keep in mind, living after

the fall of the Temple and who likely were expelled from their local synagogue – that they do not need the Temple at all. Why? Because Jesus’ body – his physical incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Holy Spirit – was sufficient and is sufficient to mediate God’s grace and mercy. Jesus is the one who introduces us to the parental heart of God, the one who makes the unknowable God knowable and approachable. Then...ever since...and still today.”

And the good news is, there is another table here today, isn’t there? A table where all are welcome. A table where all are fed. A table that won’t be turned over except as it turns over the sin in your heart. A table where the true meaning of Jesus’ words are revealed when he said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it.” words of promise and resurrection. Words that bring the death blow to all obstacles between you and God. Words and promises that give the fullest meaning to our lives. You will live because I too live! Remember me! Remember what God’s love is all about! Remember that this temple and this table is for all people. As poet, painter, and pastor Jan Richardson reminds us,

****And the Table Will Be Wide – A Blessing for World Communion Sunday— Jan Richardson***

And the table will be wide.

And the welcome will be wide.

And the arms will open wide to gather us in.

And our hearts will open wide to receive.

And we will come as children who trust there is enough.

And we will come unhindered and free.

And our aching will be met with bread.

And our sorrow will be met with wine.

And we will open our hands to the feast without shame.

And we will turn toward each other without fear.

And we will give up our appetite for despair.

And we will taste and know of delight.

And we will become bread for a hungry world.

And we will become drink for those who thirst.

And the blessed will become the blessing.

*And everywhere will be the feast.**

Thanks be to God. Let us pray

Prayers of the People by the Reverend Stephen Fearing

God of Our Lenten Journey, you are a good and generous God. Since creation's dawn, you have showered your steadfast love upon us that we might flourish and be a blessing to others. Ever since you called your people out of Egypt's bondage, you have promised to walk with us through thick and thin. Sometimes we have followed faithfully. Other times we have stumbled and fallen.

In the good times and in the bad ones, your steadfast goodness has been the only true constant in our lives. Thank you for being our God and calling us your children. Because of your goodness to us, we will bless you as long as we live; we will lift up our hands and call upon your name.

We confess, merciful Lord, that this journey to which we are called is hard. Together, as a family of faith, we have been called into a wilderness where improvisation is the name of the game. We don't know what is around every corner, and we fear what we don't know.

We beg your forgiveness for the moments when we forget to trust in your care for our wellbeing. Forgive us for the moments when we trick ourselves into thinking that there are places we can go where you cannot care for us. Remind us that whether the way be clear, or the way be wild, there is no place we can go to escape your providence and protection.

We give you thanks, Abundant Lord, for the many blessings in our lives that show your steadfast love: for the companionship of friends and family, both new and old...for the warmth and protection of shelter and the provision of food...for access to affordable healthcare and medical services...for a loving community of faith that guides, upholds, and supports...for the gift of the Lenten wilderness that grows us in new ways...for the promise of fruitfulness to come and the opportunity to flourish...

We lift up our spirits to you with all thanksgiving and praise for it is good that we should do so. We rejoice with a gladsome song that we are called your children. Receive now our song of thanksgiving!

Yet, God of all mercy and guidance, surely you know that there are those among us who are in barren places. With all honesty and courage, we lift them to you, O Lord: for those missing friends and family, both those alive and those deceased...for those who do not have the warmth of shelter in this cold months...for those without access to affordable healthcare and medical services...for those seeking communities of support and protection...for those struggling in wildernesses that only they can name...for this congregation, that they may be led through this wilderness and brought to a place of health, joy, and fruitful discipleship...for those whom we lift up to you now in prayers either silently or out loud...

Above all, Gracious God, we would ask that you would look upon our places of barrenness as opportunities for your fruitfulness to abound! Give us courage to see ourselves that way, that we might have hope and faith that we will be led through this wilderness. Remind us, God of coming resurrection, that we do not go into the wilderness to die but that we go into the wilderness to discover who we are that we might arrive on the other side with a renewed sense of life!

This we pray in your Son's name, through the power of the Spirit the prayer he taught us saying...