



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Overturning Tables”

John 2:13-22

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In today’s passage, Jesus is angry. He is angry and he acts on that anger. He yells, makes a scene, he fashions a whip and then he uses it. It’s a shocking image. It seems so out of character for Jesus. It’s like seeing Mr. Rogers engaging in road rage. This passage challenges our assumptions about the nature and character of Jesus.

Evidently, Jesus’ anger that day had something to do with buying and selling. Evidently, the buying and selling part is getting in the way of the worshipping part. Jesus tends to get mad at things that get in the way of our relationship with God. Jesus tends to get mad about things that hinder the living of a faithful life – the life that we long to live, the life that God wants for us. That day the buying and selling part is getting in the way.

It is interesting that this passage gets quoted a lot in church life. Not just this church... it has happened at every church I’ve ever been a part of. Whenever we sell something after church, someone sidles over to me and says something about moneychangers in the temple.

The first thing I want to make clear is that this passage isn’t about selling fair-trade coffee and chocolate in the narthex after worship. This passage isn’t condemning that. It has long been my belief that Jesus is a big fan of coffee and chocolate and an even bigger fan of everything the fair trade movement represents.

I think if Jesus were here today, he would run right past the coffee and chocolate table and head straight to Easton. And, upon arrival at his destination, he might do a little damage. He might smash in a store window or two. He might march into Abercrombie and Fitch and overturn a few piles of carefully folded clothes. He might run over to Crate and Barrel and scratch a coffee table or two. I’m pretty sure he would leave Trader Joe’s alone. (I just love Trader Joe’s...)

We do have a problem with the buying and the selling part that goes much deeper than purchasing traded coffee. It’s about all the other stuff we buy. It’s about the reason we buy things. We buy things in the hopes of feeling less broken and more complete. I went through phases in my life where part of my really believed that if I bought a certain thing – a certain pair of shoes, a KitchenAid mixer, the latest tech gadget – that my life would be different, better, happier. And that was true. For an amazingly short period of time.

Jesus seems to understand our odd and unhealthy relationship to accumulating things. And that it comes out of a longing to be more whole. There is table overturning that needs to be done in this part of our lives. Probably not here. This building – this place – this Sabbath day – for many of us – this is the place we get it right. This is the place where, for the most part, most days, we remember what is important, what matters, what lasts. I’m not sure we need Jesus to turn over tables in this place.

But out there? It’s more hit or miss. Out there, it’s hard to remember what satisfies and what ultimately leaves us empty. Out there, we need this willing to smash things up Jesus to remind us what matters and what lasts.

More sermons can be found online at <https://subsplash.com/broadstreetpresbyterian/sermons>

So, what would you like Jesus to overturn? Maybe you would like Jesus to march into Congress and overturn a few tables. Give all of them – Democrats and Republicans – a piece of his mind. Straighten them out. Make things better. We are all looking for something, anything that will make things better.

Mitchell Tandler has seen a lot of history. He fought in World War II. And he lived through many historical milestones of the 20th century: the Korean War, then Vietnam, and Watergate. And, in recent years, he was watching the current presidency with something bordering on obsession. Then, on December 29 of last year, at the age of 93, he began feeling unwell.

His son recalls what happens next. “I got a call at 11 o’clock. My mom said, ‘Well, Dad’s not feeling well... Within a couple of hours they got him into the ER because [he] wasn’t getting any better.’”

Mitchell Tandler began to fade. This is how his son remembers it. “It just was quiet for a little while, and then he just sits up in bed halfway and looks at me and he goes, ‘S***, I’m not going to see the Mueller report, am I?’ And that was really the last coherent thing that he said.”¹

I’ve thought a lot about this true story. And, who I am to judge someone else’s last words? I don’t think the Mueller report is last-words-before-you-die worthy. That’s getting things out of proportion. As we get closer to death, shouldn’t our thoughts turn to God, to the sacred and holy – ruminations about the meaning of life? Time and time again, I have seen dying folks focus on those people nearest and dearest to them. They speak of shared memories. They speak words of love. To spend one’s last moments in this world focused on the Mueller report? Really?

Let’s be honest. Many of us thought the Mueller report would change things, fix things, clarify the way forward, make things right. That’s a lot to put on a report. No surprise, its release has been – for many people – a bit anti-climactic. As a nation, we are left with the hard work of figuring out a way forward. We are left with the hard work of figuring out what’s important, what matters.

I think that’s what Jesus is up to that day in the temple. Jesus overturns the tables to get people’s attention. He’s saying, “Don’t get distracted by side shows. Figure out what matters. Figure out what lasts. Let me make a suggestion. God is what is important. Your life with God is what is important. God’s vision for the world is what is important. This other stuff does not satisfy. This other way doesn’t work.”

So, what would you like Jesus to overturn? Hmm. Now if it were up to me, I would point Jesus toward payday lenders and people who prey on the vulnerable. I want Jesus to take out climate change deniers and the people who make the absurd and offensive claim that the Sandy Hook shootings never happened. I want to unleash Jesus’ righteous anger on all sorts of ... other people.

I suspect that’s missing the point. That Jesus is speaking not to other people but to us. He is challenging us with his words and actions. He wants us to identify that which is getting in the way of our relationship with God. I think I can identify that one thing that is getting in the way of my relationship with God. It’s me.

My suspicion is for many of us the idol we truly worship is ourselves. It’s not that we think all that highly of ourselves. It’s just that we think everything is about us. When things go right in our lives, we give ourselves much of the credit. When things go wrong in our lives, we give ourselves most of the blame. In other words, we spend much our lives trying to be like God – autonomous, in control, author of our future. I forget every day that the air I breathe, the food I eat, the family and friends I treasure are all gifts from God. I take God and God’s gifts for granted and then go and take my role in the world far too seriously.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/05/700175470/elderly-trump-critics-await-muellers-report-sometimes-until-their-last-breath>

This way of being in the world – it doesn't work. We end up feeling exhausted, afraid, anxious. Whenever we try to be like God, that is the result. We are simply not cut out for the job. But I can say for myself, I seem to be constantly auditioning for the part. That's what I want Jesus to overturn, this Lenten season.

That day in the temple there is a lot of buying and selling, a lot of busy-ness, a lot going on and it angers Jesus because it is all getting in the way of the main thing. People come to the temple to be with God and the other stuff is getting in the way.

He overturns the tables so people can focus on him. What Jesus wants us to see is him. Let's do that now. Jesus is here. Now. With us. Among us. He has what we need. Not what we want. What we need. He provides enough. Just Jesus. Just his body broken for us. What Jesus provides is enough. It sustains. It will fill us up. What he has to offer the world is not junk food. It is the real thing. Meaning, community, a story to hold on to, a savior who will never let go.

May this season of Lent be a time to let this overturning the tables Jesus loose in our lives. May Jesus' life changing anger be released into the world. May Jesus overturn anything and everything that gets in the way of God's vision for us and for God's vision for the world.

Amen.