

March 7, 2021 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Creator God, we don't just want to listen. We want to hear you. We want to read scripture aloud and know that you are as close as you have always been. We want to read scripture aloud and feel your word resonating inside our bones. We want to read scripture aloud and have your words stuck in our heads like a melody, falling off our lips like a love song.

Creator God, we don't just want to listen, we want to hear you. So turn our hearts toward you, just as you turned strangers into disciples. Turn our ears toward you, just as you turned tables in the temple. We are listening.

Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 2, verses 13-22. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

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

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine (and fellow pastor) shared a Facebook post that stopped me in my tracks. It read: Father forgive me for the times I desired a seat at a table you would've flipped.

Well that hits a bit too close to home. It invokes this uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach because I KNOW, if I'm honest and vulnerable, that this statement applies to me too.

How many times have I wanted a seat, or even sat, at a table Christ would have flipped?

It's tempting, when we read the story of Christ flipping the tables in the temple in fiery rage that we simply champion that Christ who denounces hypocrisy and corrupt powers. But perhaps it's truer to the story, when we flip those tables on ourselves: what tables are we part of that Christ would overturn?

To understand all the nuances of this story, we have to understand the context. This story of Jesus cleansing the temple is in all four gospels, but as with a lot of things, John's telling of the story is significantly different.

The biggest, and perhaps most important difference is the placement of the story. In all the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), this story is near the end of Gospels, after Jesus rides into Jerusalem. It is the final public act, whereby the authorities make the decision to arrest and kill Jesus.

In John, it's close to the beginning, and it directly follows the wedding at Cana where (at his mother's request) Jesus turns water into wine first of seven signs (or miracles) that occur throughout the Gospel.

These signs each allow us to see Christ's glory, which reveal his identity as the Son of God.

This story, immediately following the first sign, must then also allow us to see Christ's glory, reveal his identity: but this time, we see his identify as a prophet, following the traditions of the Old Testament prophets who cried out in protest of the profaning of the temple.

While it's clear this is what Christ is doing, it's murky for us as to why Christ is doing this. You see, nothing that was going on in the temple that day was exactly or completely wrong.

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to get ready for Passover and sees exactly what you would expect at that time. In fact, all that was going on, ironically, was necessary for the survival and flourishing of the temple.

Hulitt Gloer explains it best when he writes: "the temple tax had to be paid in temple coinage, so money changers were necessary. Because sacrificial animals had to be without blemish, sellers of sacrificial animals were necessary. After all, who could make it all the way to Jerusalem without an unblemished animal? All of this activity was in service to the temple."

You see, all these acts were in service to the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover.

We can easily find ourselves within this story as pilgrims in the temple, engaging in this practice.

Lent is a time where we prepare as well, we practice traditions and rituals to prepare ourselves for that Easter Sunday, when we celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

Thus, the uneasy pit in my stomach continues: perhaps you, now, feel it too.

It forces us to ask the question, what are the ways our church prepares for Easter, that perhaps Christ would flip the tables on?

In the temple in Jerusalem, Christ explains clearly why he flipped the tables on something seemingly innocent.

Verse 16: “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

He draws a line between the sacred and secular, and in doing so, denounces the entire system that seems to keep the temple afloat.

Lent is a time to turn inward. We did that last Sunday, individually, when we asked ourselves, “What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus” and in doing so, realized that by picking up our own cross, by denying ourselves and following Christ as a disciple, we might find ourselves in unexpected places.

We turn inward today, as well.

But as a community, not individually, and we ask ourselves: “What does it mean to be the church of Jesus?”

And part of that answer is humbly realizing, like the temple in Jerusalem, that (to paraphrase Gloer) the ways of the world invade our church too – gradually, subtly, never intentionally, always in service of the church and its mission. We too, in ways turn God’s house into a marketplace.

It’s part of the reality that Lent invites us to face: that Christ criticizes us too.

Yes, Christ speaks for us – but also to us, and even against us.

But just as Jesus cleansed the temple, so too, can the church be cleansed today.

As part of the reformed church, you probably have heard the phrase: reformed and always reforming.” It speaks to the reality that the church always needs cleansing, and should always be open to change and reform.

This phrase is a Latin translation, but it’s actually incorrect.

A truer translation is “the church reformed always to be reformed according to the word of God.”

The key difference in these two similar translations is who does the reforming. You see, in reformed and always reforming, one might easily assume that the church is the agent of its own reform. We decide how to reform. But that’s just not true. We would be a bit naïve indeed to assume we know what’s best.

“the church reformed always to be reformed according to the word of God.”

No, we are reformed by and for the word of God. Perhaps the word of God looks like different things in different times and different places, but rarely, perhaps, never, is the word of God what we deem it to be. While preparing for this sermon, I’ve gone back to that facebook post many times.

And still, each time, it catches me off guard. An uneasy feeling overcomes me. What tables have I desired a seat at that Christ would flipped.

But I try to sit there, in that feeling of unease and perhaps fear, and time and time again, God shows me that when we face that fear, when we acknowledge that uneasy feeling and act on it, not suppress it – Christ will meet me there.

Christ, the Word of God, reforms me. Cleanses me. So this Lenten season, as we journey to Jerusalem, sit in the unease. Imagine yourself as a pilgrim in that temple – you will not be alone. We all are there with you.

And as we prepare in the temple – let us not ignore Christ the prophet – the agent of our reform.

And when he overturns the tables – do not be afraid. The grace of Christ is this – even when he flips the table on us – we are cleansed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.