

“Tables Are Turned”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent III – March 4, 2018

John 2: 13-22

You all were very kind to remember me on my birthday weekend last Sunday. I can tell you that the cookies did not last long in my office, and that the car wash ticket has already been used this weekend. And Debbie and I are looking forward to going out to dinner with the gift card you gave me.

Since you were so kind to me last Sunday, I only feel it’s appropriate for me to repay the favor to you. So, here it goes: “Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, John Knox, happy birthday to you!”

Surprised? It’s okay if you are. Whether you realized it or not, today is your birthday. It was fifty-six years ago today that John Knox Presbyterian Church was born. That Sunday, we met at St. John’s Episcopal Church just down 30th Street, and this congregation was officially chartered by the presbytery. There are only a few folks today who were present at that service 56 years ago. But it was because of those saints, their vision, and their commitment that we are here today.

Think for a moment about all that has transpired in our church’s life over fifty-six years. Our physical space has changed significantly, including our worship space, educational rooms, fellowship hall, and office space. The city and neighborhood has changed dramatically in that time – including businesses, homes, schools, and roads. I was surprised to learn that the first stretch of I-465 was built right out here at the same time John Knox was founded. Our church has reflected those changes in our community. We began as a primarily white, suburban, Speedway-centered church. We have become more ethnically diverse, we come from a wider geographic area, and we are now in a more urban setting.

It is natural to long for times past, for large events, and for people who are no longer with us. But I believe that all these changes our church has experienced over fifty-six years are healthy signs that we have sought to stay connected and fresh and relevant to the community we are called to serve.

Does that mean that we are perfect and nothing needs to change moving forward? Of course not. We are human and we are always in need of examining ourselves as a congregation. As Presbyterians, we recall one of the Reformation’s tag lines – “Reformed, Always Reforming.” But that phrase is not complete without the rest of the statement – “Reformed, always reforming according to the Word of God.” We look to examine and reform ourselves – as a church and as individuals – not solely by our thoughts and desires, but through the lens of God’s Incarnate Word.

That Incarnate Word of God – Jesus Christ our Lord – is the one doing the reforming in our scripture passage today. He is turning the tables on the religious establishment in Jerusalem, speaking to them in ways they do not understand, but later his followers would fully understand. And he challenges us, in the Season of

Lent, to look at our lives and consider what tables need turning over to truly become the disciples we are called to be.

One of the things we talked about in our bible study on Tuesday was the placement of this story in John's Gospel. It is not a story unique to John – in fact, it appears in all four gospels. However, what is unique to John is that it comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, just after he has turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this story takes place immediately after Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, during his last days on earth. John chose to place this event at the start of Jesus' adult life, and in doing so brackets the beginning and ending of his life with events in the holy city.

The main thing we notice in this passage is Jesus getting angry, turning over the tables of the money changers, and driving the livestock out of the temple courts. On the surface, we may assume that this was not normal practice in those days, and that's why Jesus says, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" That's what I had always assumed, as well.

But there are a couple of things to consider. First, look at what's going on when this takes place: "The Passover of the Jews was near . . ." (2:13). That means that thousands of visitors from all over the region would have come to the holy city for the Passover Festival. Second, their worship would have required animal sacrifices, according to the Jewish customs, and it would have been impractical for them to transport their own animals, along with themselves and their families and belongings. So, it was common for cattle, sheep, doves, and other animals to be available for purchase by pilgrims. This scene would have been familiar and very customary for the Jewish people during a festival like Passover.

Jesus' anger and frustration, then, is not necessarily rooted in the fact that animals were being sold in the courts of the temple. It's rooted in the abuse of the system by these moneychangers and the religious authorities, and all of this taking place in the shadow of the holiest of sites for the Jewish people. We don't see Jesus angry very often in the gospels – this is one of the few times that we witness his very human side. But we also are told why: "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:18). It is Jesus' passion and zeal for God that spurs him to overturn the tables, drive out the livestock, and challenge directly the established comfort levels of those in authority.

One of the other things to keep in mind as we read this story, and for that matter any of the gospels, is to consider who is reading it and why it was written. All of these stories were written and recorded after Jesus died, rose, and ascended into heaven. They were written so that others might learn about his life and come to believe in him. Indeed, in today's passage, we are told that, "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" (2:22). We don't always recognize what is happening in the moment that it is happening. Sometimes we need time and distance to reflect on the events of the past to understand them more fully and completely.

Mihee Kim-Kort is a Presbyterian minister and author, and her husband, Andy, is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bloomington. Mihee writes: *The Gospel of John is sometimes referred to as the Book of Signs, and this narrative is framed*

around these signs - changing water into wine, healing the royal official's son, healing the paralytic, feeding the five thousand, walking on water, healing the blind man, and raising Lazarus. The signs aren't just miracles. They invite us to see and explore the meaning of Jesus as both the son of man, with all his sads, glads, and mads, and the son of God, who inspires celebration and instigates confrontation. It's these signs that guide us in our journeys, whether through Advent or Lent, whether to Bethlehem or to Jerusalem or to Emmaus, as we discover the presence of God as Emmanuel, God-with-Us (*Christian Century*, February 14, 2018, 20).

John begins his gospel by reminding us that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:1,14). The Word by which we are reformed and always reforming is flesh and bone, just like all the human creatures God created. And in relating to us in our common form, God meets us face to face to teach us, care for us, love us, and change us. God works miracles - signs of the divine - through his Incarnate Word. But God also shows deep passion and human emotion through his Incarnate Word.

Many times during Lent, we will focus on making a change in our lives during these forty days. We may give up something that is unhealthy, or seek to do something positive for this season of preparation. And often, once Easter is here, we feel good about achieving our goal, and revert back to old behaviors or patterns.

One of the participants in the bible study Tuesday said to me, "Why don't we seek to make changes in our lives that are permanent and long-term?" Indeed, I believe that is part of this message for us today with Jesus' cleansing of the temple. Don't just think about forty days, or a season of the year. What tables need overturning in our lives so that sustainable change takes place?

Consider what happens in our homes when we move pieces of furniture that have been in one place for a long time. There is dust, cobwebs, trash, unwanted surprises underneath. We have to move it out of the way to clean, to refresh, and then decide how we wish for all that furniture to be put back - either in the places they were in before, or to rearrange the room so that things have a new place and purpose.

What in our lives of faith need cleaning, moving, and rearranging? What do we need to change in our individual lives that isn't just for a season, but is sustainable and long-lasting, so that our faith is more deeply rooted than before? What in our church's life needs to be examined in a new way so that we are not merely comfortable, but are challenged to grow broader and deeper in our discipleship? What tables would Jesus overturn at John Knox so that we might continue to reform, always reforming, according to God's Incarnate Word?

We've been here fifty-six years by and through the grace of God. May we continue to look ahead and be willing to listen intently for God's re-forming Word as we grow broader and deeper as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.