

“Overturned Tables”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, March 4, 2018

John 2 and 1 Corinthians 1

In 19 BC, King Herod began building the temple in Jerusalem. It was not until 64 AD that the building was finally finished. Our passage finds Jesus standing in the temple at the forty-six year mark of construction; it would be another twenty years before it was completed.

Jesus stood in the midst of this magnificent structure and told all who were there that all its splendours and all the money and skill that had been lavished on it were completely irrelevant; that he had come to show a way to come to God without any Temple at all.

In the mid 1800’s, in the township of Whitchurch Stouffville, Methodist families gathered for worship in their homes. Then in 1841, they had services in the old school house located on this very site where we worship. An itinerant Methodist preacher made regular visits to help them organize.

In 1853, the Wesleyan Church in Stouffville had its actual beginning, calling its first resident pastor Rev. Cornelius Flummerfelt to preside at services in the school house.

In later years, the school was purchased and used as the official church building. The school house continued service until 1872 when it was moved across the street (where it still stands at #17 and #19 Church Street) and a new brick building was erected. Twenty years later in 1892 this sanctuary was built.¹

The Jewish people followed the Law and the Prophets as laid down in the first five books of the Old Testament, known to them as the Torah. And in Deuteronomy 14 we read the requirement of the people to bring tithes to the Temple in Jerusalem:

“Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.

But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, then you may turn it into money.

With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; spend the money for whatever you wish – oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together.” (Deut 14:22-26)

¹ From the ‘History’ Tab at www.stouffvilleuc.ca website.

So when we read this as the background to what was happening in that Temple when Jesus walked in, we understand that the Law *required* the animals and the money changers, for God had chosen the Temple in Jerusalem to be the ‘dwelling for his name’.

If you lived close by, you could herd your animals over yourself. However, if you lived on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, you sold your animals at home and brought the cash with you to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Offerings had to be purchased within the temple, using temple currency. Roman monies were forbidden because they were stamped with the image of Ceasar and so the currency had to be exchanged for temple coinage that would be allowable within the temple. So the money changers were essential to the system.

Jesus stands outside the temple. You see him knotting cords into a whip. And clenching the cord in his fist, he enters the temple. He drives the people out. He pours the coins onto the floor. He overturns the tables.

This image of Jesus does not match up with the image we carry when we sing, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know.’ This is an angry Jesus. A zealous Jesus.

Jesus is dismantling the sacrificial system that had been in place. He is *throwing* it out the door with the animals. And he is replacing it with, *himself*.

Just before our passage from today, Jesus had performed the first of several ‘signs’ of his divinity – at the Wedding at Cana, where he turned the water into wine. And following the wedding, he traveled to Jerusalem and walked into the temple.

Unlike the other gospels which place this story much later in their gospel narrative, and unlike the other gospels who say that Jesus overturned the tables in response to the corruption found in the temple, here, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is saying that the temple is not where to find God. If you want to find God, God is here, in me.

Think of the beginning of John’s Gospel: “ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Jn 1:1) “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:14)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus will continue to have discussions with others about *where* to find God. In John 4, Jesus meets the Woman at the Well. She says to him, ‘Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ (Jn 4:20)

And Jesus answers, ‘The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.’ (4:22) Jesus adds, “The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” (Jn 4:23)

You and I, as we worship in ‘this temple’, are called by Jesus to look past the brick and mortar of the temple to find God. Churches can become inward looking, thinking only of themselves, and the church can forget where to find God.

On my online ministry group was this comment: “As a wise one once observed, we are called to become fishers of people and instead have become *keepers of the aquarium*.”

One aspect of the institutional church that troubles me deeply is that we distort discipleship to mean serving on a committee or some other in-house activity rather than helping our people understand that mission begins at our doorstep.”

The Apostle Paul in our second reading from today in 1 Corinthians 1 tells us that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of humanity. The Gospel “does not operate according to the wisdom of the world. For the wisdom of the world leads to division, hierarchies in social order and privileges bestowed on a few.”²

The wisdom of the world *plays* with the game of overturning tables – to advance personal agendas, leading to division and hierarchy and power games. Here are some examples:

The war of words over nuclear armament as North Korea, Russia and the United States *overturn tables* between them;

In Stouffville, as fractious elements in the political arena of Council *overturn tables* between them with distracting and ridiculous conditions.

I also look at the world and see where the tables of division and hierarchy and power are overturned, *restoring* respect and relationship and equality.

The #metoo movement is *overturning tables* in Hollywood, classical music, business and political fiefdoms.

The Young people from Parkland Highschool are *overturning tables* with rippling effects in relationships between politicians and business and the NRA

Jesus *overturns* the tables of the temple and in so doing destroys the old order. And his words point to a new order. *There is another way*.

Instead of overturning tables,

we should be *setting* the table,

for community that embraces equality and mutuality,

for community that welcomes everyone,

² www.workingpreacher.org, Commentary on John 2:13-22

for community that remembers to look to the neighbour and not themselves.

Come, for the table is now ready.