

# **“Turning the Tables”**

John 2:13-22

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Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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

I love monopoly. Unabashedly, unashamedly love monopoly. It’s fun and fast paced, it’s exciting and tense. Some people will tell you that a game of monopoly takes forever and is not actually fun. I disagree. However, I find that monopoly is only fun when the people playing want to play. I would posit that the average (long and boring) game of monopoly goes something like this: game starts, you make it once, twice around the board, one player gets up to make popcorn for five minutes, you go around the board once more, another player goes to the other room to do their hair for an hour, one player steals money from the bank trying to be cute, three hours later you forget that you were playing monopoly in the first place and accidentally sit on the board. That’s monopoly with people who don’t like monopoly. A good monopoly game lasts about an hour and moves fast. One of my favorite things about monopoly, though, is its history. While the official story is that it was invented

in 1935 by a Philadelphia engineer by the name of Charles Darrow, the truth is that the prototype of the game was invented in 1903 by a woman named Lizzie Magie. Lizzie was politically engaged and well aware of the income inequality of the time, teaching about its dangers and pitfalls. She created “the Landlord’s Game” to teach about the ways in which poverty can be so crushing. Describing it she said “It might well have been called the ‘Game of Life’, as it contains all the elements of success and failure in the real world, and the object is the same as the human race in general seem[s] to have, ie, the accumulation of wealth.” Why do I bring up monopoly? For a few reasons. 1) I find this history fascinating and no one ever wants to talk about it, so I’m taking advantage of a captive audience 2) I feel like most monopoly games end similarly to what happens in scripture and 3) the kind of drive to accumulation and greed is the exact thing that Jesus was railing against in scripture today.

Jesus entered the Temple and saw what it was. This was during Passover, a time when many were making the pilgrimage from far away to the temple. In order to offer a sacrifice in the temple you needed your animals to be pure, and bringing an animal from far away was no guarantee that you would be able to keep it clean. Similarly, the foreign coins often had imprinted images of emperors and rulers, which meant that the coins couldn’t enter the heart of the temple. So, sure, it was probably a good thing that there were money changers and animal sellers in the temple. Sure, it was probably necessary that animals and coins for the sacrifices be found on site. Why, though, was it happening in the temple? Why would they defile the holy place with the world’s ugliness? Furious, Jesus flipped the tables, drove out the cattle, scattered the people who were making profane the temple. Jesus knew the economic hardship by those making the pilgrimage, he knew of their needs. How dare people be taken advantage of! How dare these people in need be exploited!

What do we do when we find ourselves faced with this injustice? How do we respond to when the world harms the weak and takes advantage of the dispossessed. Not too long ago there was a fad in which people wore bracelets with the letters WWJD. This bracelet served as a reminder to ask oneself in difficult moments “What Would Jesus Do?” This reminder proves helpful in the face of injustice “If anyone ever asks you ‘What would Jesus do?’

Remind them that flipping over tables and chasing people with a whip is within the realm of possibilities". What injustices in our world do we see today? Rampant income inequality, racial disparity, the absence of civil discourse, pervasive and often undisclosed gender based violence. We need to remember as we venture into the world that Jesus was not just a person who taught, but a person who acted. A human being who provoked thought and controversy by encouraging a kingdom that looks nothing like the world, but who also made sure to live up to this teaching by approaching mistreatment of others with dramatic action. It's encouraging to see this witness, the kind of Christian witness that spoke bravely against slavery in the United States, the Nazis in Germany, against the apartheid regime in South Africa. We can be enlivened by the witness of Jesus and I would love nothing more than to send you all out of this building today saying "flip all of the tables you see – go into the seats of power in this land and declare that their exploitation and offenses have come to an end". I would like to, but I can't.

That's because Jesus didn't enter into the halls of the magistrate and flip over the tables. He didn't walk into a board room and flip over tables. No. He walked right into the temple. He walked into the heart of worship and demanded an end to injustice. Sigh, I hate when Jesus forces me to think critically about myself. I much prefer pointing the finger outwards. Jesus entered the temple and demanded an end to this practice of selling animals. This is not to say that we should be accepting of the injustice of the world, but as Jesus said "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's<sup>[a]</sup> eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your neighbor,<sup>[b]</sup> 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's<sup>[c]</sup> eye."

Where are those places that the church reflects the world's depravity? Pro-slavery and pro-segregation churches in the United States. The German Church's support of Nazism. The church's explicit support of apartheid in South Africa. Historical moments in which we see the church failing to live into its vision as prophet of God's kingdom. Soren Kierkegaard, Danish existentialist and theologian, wrote a treatise against the church in 1855. In the essay "What Christ's Judgment is About Official Christianity" he says with (some) satirical exaggeration "Imagine that the people are assembled in a

church in Christendom and Christ suddenly enters the assembly. What dost thou think He would do? He would turn upon the teachers... who have made God's house, if not a den of robbers, at least a shop, a peddler's stall, and would say "ye hypocrites, ye serpents, ye generation of vipers" and likely as of yore He would make a whip of small cords and drive them out of the temple" There's a significant appeal to point outwards and say that 'the world' is not as it should be, but there's less appeal to point inwards and say 'we often resemble the world'. One of the co-moderators of the PC(USA), Rev. Jan Edmiston, who preached from this pulpit not long ago wrote a blog post on Groundhogs Day about trauma in churches. She starts by talking the obvious trauma, the 200-year-old church that burned down, the shooting in Sutherland Springs, but then she transitions into talking about some of the quieter traumas faced by the church. She says "What is less obvious but perhaps even more destructive – because there is shame and blame involved – is trauma caused by individuals in church organizations: the trusted leader who stole money, the... leader who emotionally abused staff and parishioners, the sexual misconduct leader who violated both the trust and bodies of human beings in his pastoral care". Her fellow co-moderator, Rev. Tawnya Anderson wrote a blog post about her experience as a pastor in the church. "Where women are in ordered ministry in the Church, the [pay] gap is just as problematic and in some cases wider. Pastors who are also mothers are five times as likely to be called to part-time positions. We more regularly call women to positions with less job security". One of my seminary colleagues, Rev. Abby Mohaupt, wrote a post about her experience of sexual harassment in the church. She prefaced the essay by saying "I am editing this piece just after a man came up to me at a presbytery meeting, looked me over, and said, "Baby, you got this thing figured out." While it doesn't matter what I'm wearing it is notable that I'm fully covered and wearing my collar."

I should say, I have not experienced or witnessed anything of this nature at my time here at Covenant. I know that just yesterday our church became a marketplace of sorts. If Jesus were to walk into our doors during Trash and Treasures, I think he would celebrate the spirit of giving found in the halls. In the temple, the moneychangers and sellers of animals were profiting from others' needs. Yesterday, we were bringing in money to further the mission and ministries of the church, and so I think Jesus would probably walk out with a new t-shirt or croquet set. I think Covenant does a good job of avoiding

the kinds of poisonous behaviors that betray the church's mission and dehumanize its members. I see respect and joy, I see humility and hope in this place. But Covenant Presbyterian Church is but one part of the body of Jesus Christ. It is only a part of the church, and as members of this body we need to be witnesses to the ministry of Jesus Christ. We can be the ones to flip the tables. This may not be popular, but in order to be able to effectively proclaim the kingdom of God in the world, we need to strive to better reflect the kingdom of God in our own house. What tables need flipping in the Christian church? What does it look like to flip those tables? Boz Tchividjian is the grandson of the recently deceased evangelist Billy Graham. A New York Times article recently mentioned this about Boz, that he "is a former prosecutor who founded the organization GRACE — Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment — to investigate and prevent child abuse in evangelical ministries. He said his grandfather inspired him to work 'with those who are hurting and have been marginalized by society, and quite frankly, the church.'" Jan Edmiston continues her blog post from earlier, referring to the hidden traumas in the church by saying "On this Groundhog Day in the Year of Our LORD 2018, what it never means is hiding in a hole and hoping spring will come six weeks later. We as the Church need to deal with the past before we can flourish in the future. God surely wants us to live in abundance." Tawnya and Jan, our co-moderators, together wrote an open letter to the church in response to #churchtoo and talking about the unique place of the church in the world. They say "we are called in this unique time to seek a deeper cultural shift. We are called to stand up against a world that allows predators to flourish and victims to be shamed into silence. The Church is called to be what the world is not: safe, life-giving, and willing to hold people accountable."

We are called to be what the world is not. We need to be different from the world. We need to be different from the institutions whose sole mission is to stay in business. We need to hold accountable those who stand in the way of God's kingdom. We need to insist that economic, cultural, physical, life wounding power is not the goal of the church. We need to let Jesus in, let some tables be flipped, let sin be driven from this place. We need to let Jesus, whips and all, show us where we err, and how we can fix it. Let's open our doors to the disruptive, agitating, norm-shattering Jesus, the one who points to hypocrisy and drives it from the temple. And when that time comes, I pray

that we don't chastise this prophet for his disruptive behavior, but celebrate the ushering in of a new, better way to live.