

**March 3, 2024**  
**“Turning Tables”**  
**Exodus 20:1-17 / John 2:13-22**  
**Pastor Tim**

Fresh off the Poor People's and Low Wage Workers' State Assembly yesterday in Harrisburg, a gathering replicated in more than 30 states around the country, demanding an end to poverty in the United States, I'm thinking about tables this morning.

Who's welcome, and who's not, at the tables we construct?

The great Nina Simone recorded the song, “You've Got to Learn,” in June of 1965. The song includes the famous line, “You've got to learn to leave the table when love's no longer being served.”

Self-care and self-preservation. A fundamental acknowledgment that we all deserve love.

Shirley Chisolm, the first African American woman in Congress (that was 1968) and the first woman and African American to seek the nomination for president of the United States (that was 1972), famously said, “If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” Stubborn, righteous determination.

The oldest daughter of immigrants, Chisolm's father from Guyana and her mother from Barbados, she came to be known as “Fighting Shirley” – introducing countless pieces of legislation championing racial and gender equality, the plight of the poor, and ending the Vietnam War.

And then there's James Forman, executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1961 to 1966. Nine days after “Bloody Sunday” and the first attempted and failed civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, led by then-SNCC chairman John Lewis and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Hosea Williams, and met by horrific state-sanctioned violence at the Edmund Pettis Bridge; and a week after the infamous “Turnaround Tuesday” march – during which Dr. King and others led more than 2,500 people, including my uncle, to the Edmund Pettis Bridge only to turn around when met by police, as had been secretly negotiated ahead of time, Forman

uttered these famous and fiery and, at the time, controversial, words within the larger nonviolent freedom struggle:

“If we can’t sit at the table of democracy, then we’ll knock the fucking legs off.”

Apologies for the language, but it's important that we hear the rage. He goes on: “But before we tear it completely down, they will move to build a better one, rather than see this one destroyed.”

Radical, righteous anger. Anger. Forman demanding, among other things, that President Lyndon Johnson, that the United States government, act to protect the demonstrators. Its own citizens.

All three, responses to tables of inhospitality and injustice – from self-care and self-protection to determination to anger. A time and place for each, no doubt, but it is radical, righteous anger that brings us to Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson this morning – as Gerry just read for us – recalls one of the few stories detailed in all four gospels. John’s account places the story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and it is the ONLY one to do so. Right after his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, turning water into wine.

The three “synoptic” gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – place it at the END of Jesus’ ministry (and indeed, his life), immediately following his triumphal and final entry into Jerusalem, the event which we’ll celebrate again on Palm Sunday.

At the end is the more likely historically accurate – Jesus’ very public act of defiance a, or perhaps THE, final straw toward his impending arrest, trial and crucifixion.

Nonetheless, in all four accounts, the event, the “incident,” takes place in the days leading up to the Passover feast; the Jewish celebration marking the Israelites’ escape from Egyptian bondage.

Each year in the days leading up to the Passover, thousands of faithful Jewish pilgrims would make the often long and arduous journey to Jerusalem to give offerings to the God they believed, through Moses, had led their people to freedom.

Now this is an important detail because it gives us an understanding of just what Jesus would have encountered when he himself arrived in Jerusalem. The city would have been packed. One scholar estimates that the population of Jerusalem more than tripled around Passover. And if the city was packed, the Temple and the area around it were even more so.

So picture massive crowds, elbow-to-elbow crowds, pushing their way through to get beyond the outer courts where the marketplace was to the Temple itself. It was a chaotic scene, and it was loud.

John tells us that when Jesus arrived at the Temple he “found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.”

Why? Because Temple cultic practice demanded it. According to Levitical codes, burnt offerings had to come from animals without blemish. And since you couldn't very well bring your own animals and expect them to remain without blemish over the long journey to Jerusalem, you had to buy them.

Cattle and sheep. Doves were most often the offering of choice among the very poor, who could not afford anything else.

In addition, pilgrims were required to pay a Temple tax, paid in the local currency to help support maintenance of the Temple. Hence money changers and tax collectors.

And if you read through the rest of the gospels, you know that where there were tax collectors, there was corruption. Exploitation.

Corruption and exploitation and injustice that, of course, very much continues to this day, on scales big and small, in ways that prioritize the subsidization of affluent wealth and keep poor people poor. Poverty, in the United States, is the fourth leading cause of death. And it persists because, whether we realize it or not, so many of us benefit from it. It persists because we, collectively, let it – as books like Matthew Desmond's, “Poverty, by America,” (which we just finished reading in our book study) and the ongoing Poor People's Campaign remind us.

The reality into which Jesus entered the Temple that day is a reality that persists. And in the midst of such exploitation and injustice, in a place deemed God's house, of all places, Jesus can't take it anymore!

"Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle."

In John's account, it's apparently just the animals but in the other gospels, we're told Jesus drove out ALL who were buying and selling. And in Mark's version, he would not allow ANYONE to carry ANYTHING through the Temple. Remember we're talking about thousands of people here. Thousands.

Jesus' radical, righteous anger on full display. This is as angry as we find Jesus in the gospels. And he does not hold back. He goes off, pouring "out the coins of the money changers" and overturning "their tables."

The last time I preached on this text was 17 years ago at Calvary, relatively fresh out of seminary. Some of you may recall that I had a folding table on the stage with a bunch of pennies on it. I turned the table over, sending the pennies all over the stage – a micro reenactment to try to give some tangible feeling of what it might've been like to see and hear Jesus turning tables outside the Temple as the Passover neared.

Picture the noise. The chaos.

It was loud. And then, I like to imagine, it was eerily silent. The money changers and tax collectors, the priests and religious leaders, the Roman authorities and guards, the thousands of pilgrims in every direction, stunned, even just for a moment, at what they'd just witnessed.

The people were spellbound, Luke's account tells us. The chief priests, the scribes, the religious leaders were not – again, this incident just another reason to try to kill him.

So I'm sure, if there was silence, even for a moment or two, it got loud again. Real quick.

This, friends, is the Jesus who gets white-washed, sanitized, domesticated, ignored, time and time again in the Christian, capital-C Church – and so beyond the Church.

This, friends, is the radical, revolutionary Jesus who got into plenty of what John Lewis two millennia later called “good trouble.”

This is the radical, revolutionary Jesus whose RIGHTEOUS ANGER – rage, alongside his unrelenting love – fueled his commitment to consistently and publicly confront religious, political and social indifference, hypocrisy, exploitation and injustice. This is the radical, revolutionary Jesus who emphasize the spirit of divine law, inspired by God's covenant of love established with God's people – beginning with those first 10 commandments handed down to Moses atop Mt. Sinai, as we also read this morning.

This is the radical, revolutionary Jesus following in the footsteps of the prophet Isaiah, seeing his own life's work as anointed by the Spirit “to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”

Turning tables. Disrupting, upending, upside-downing the status quo. Speaking truth to power.

The reality in which Jesus lived and died is a reality that persists.

So the question is: Where is your radical, righteous anger, and ours together? Seeing the world in its tragic and preventable brokenness, and refusing to close our eyes or cover our ears or turn our backs because, deep down, we all long, LONG, for another way. A better way for all of us, for all Creation.

And deep down, beyond our despair and overwhelm and fear, we know that another way, a better way, is possible.

Tapping into your righteous anger, what are you, what are we together, willing to do – consistently, publicly – to confront the tables of inhospitality and injustice?

When they're no longer serving love, to get up and walk away.

When they fail to welcome everyone, EVERYONE, to bring our own folding chairs – or bring chairs on behalf of and in solidarity with those who are unwelcomed.

And when they are the very sources or sites of exploitation and inequity and injustice, to – and let me say it again, knock the fucking legs off. To turn them over altogether, as Jesus did, when they exploit and criminalize the poor to keep them poor – and subsidize the rich to make them richer.

When they empower corporations, the powerful and wealthy few, to literally buy public policy that feeds their interests and their interests alone.

When they argue that certain jobs don't deserve a living wage.

When they refuse to guarantee universal health and child care.

When they deny affordable housing and encourage punishing debt.

When they whitewash racism – past and present – from our history books and library shelves and classrooms.

When they dismantle, rather than expand, voter access – and especially disenfranchise Black and brown voters.

When they maintain glass and paper ceilings.

When they defend individual gun rights at the expense of public safety.

When they fund unequal education.

When they foster discrimination of and violence against LGBTQIA persons of sacred worth.

When they destroy the planet in the name of profit.

When they turn borders of welcome into borders with walls.

When they beat the drums of war and violence, and justify genocide.

You likely heard the story of Aaron Bushnell, a 25-year-old Air Force service member, who last Sunday afternoon, outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., placed his phone on the ground and livestreamed himself as he set himself on fire, shouting, "Free

Palestine." The second act of self-immolation in the U.S. occasioned by the ongoing war and devastation in Gaza.

Aaron Bushnell died Sunday night, but he posted the following on his Facebook page: "Many of us like to ask ourselves, 'What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?'

"The answer is, you're doing it. Right now."

His was a moving and frankly, disturbing, act of civil disobedience. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, longtime Jewish peace, justice and climate activist and founder of The Shalom Center in Mt. Airy, offers that we may react to Aaron's action with fear, horror, awe, respect, repugnance. Or, as he writes, "maybe FearHorrorAweRespectRepugnance all-at-once, and more."

He notes that while we likely find his action extreme, it was "much, much less extreme than the attack of October 7<sup>th</sup> against Israelis or the incessant attacks against Palestinians by bullet, bomb, rocket that have killed quickly or as slowly and with utter pain as that fire that (Aaron) contrived for himself."

How do we respond?

He goes on to write: "All I can do is this: I will not do the fire that Aaron kissed and screamed. I urge others to make a different choice from his. The fire he lit consumed him. For me, the fire must come from the Burning Bush whose fire did not consume the Bush it burned in. The deep interior fire of Love and Liberation. And that does not mean that I am Moses. I am one of the multitude, trudging toward Sinai, learning from my cousin Aaron and many others. What I learn from Aaron is not to do the act he did but to act in the spirit of his action."

For Rabbi Waskow, that means increasing and strengthening his own work to end the bloodshed in Gaza – as he says, "When the children of Isaac and the children of Ismael are at peace, so am I. When they are shedding each other's blood, I am torn."

"Remember those who are in prison," says the letter to the Hebrews, "as though you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."

Rabbi Waskow urges us all to choose actions we will take to end the bloodshed and the suffering.

And indeed, Jesus, in his public display of radical, righteous anger, urges us to tap into our own righteous anger. And to do whatever we CAN, MUST, right now, to end the bloodshed. The oppression. The exploitation. The injustice.

To disrupt, upend, upside-down the status quo. Speak truth to power. Turn the tables. Leave the tables. Bring our folding chairs. Knock the legs off, tear them down and rebuild.

Whatever we need to do to ensure and construct tables where there is more than enough room, and more than enough beauty and bounty and blessing to go around.

May it be so.