

Sermon on March 3, 2024, Rev. Tori Sumner

John 2:13-22: The Jewish Passover was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

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.

He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

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.

This past Ash Wednesday, I sat at a table in the student center at The College of New Jersey, handing out ashes to students as they walked by. Now this isn't an unusual practice—there were other ministers there handing out ashes too. What was unusual about our table was a few other things: first, we had ashes mixed with glitter; second, there were three queer

ministers seated behind the table, Pastor Morgan, Rosa, and me, and third, our table was draped with rainbow Pride flags. It was a very colorful scene to behold.

Now this is not the first time we had set up a table like this; the UKirk campus ministry frequently does tabling at the student center, which means setting up a table with information and candy and stickers and other goodies in hopes that students will come by and learn about the program. The student center in fact has tables set up for this purpose, with student groups claiming space most days to sell ice cream bars or Ramen or flowers to raise money for their programs.

But the UKirk table is always decked in rainbows, and the things on the table are always free. On that particular day the treat was glitter ashes and a reminder of our mortality instead of candy.

Because of the rainbows and the glitter, we drew some attention to ourselves that day. This attention meant that queer students who might not otherwise feel comfortable approaching a table to receive ashes came and received ashes from us. It also meant that there were a number of students who came asking questions—not earnest, open questions, but leading questions about what we really believed about sin and the Bible, and how we understood the Bible’s take on “homosexuality.”

After we had fielded several of these questions, one particular student approached the table alone. “I see you have glitter ashes,” he said. “I thought Lent was supposed to be about repentance. Why do you have glitter?”

We explained the history and meaning: Glitter ashes emerged from the LGBTQ+ community recently as a way to incorporate queer pride into Ash Wednesday, as a way to display who we are on our bodies, as a way

to reclaim a holiday about repentance that often had been used to shame queer people for being sinful.

This student strongly disagreed with this take. Repentance and pride did not go together, he said. Didn't we believe that Lent was about sin? Didn't we believe that queer people needed to repent too?

As patiently as I could, I said, "Sure, everyone needs to repent, but queer people have been told to repent for their queerness for a long time. And we don't believe that's something they need to repent for."

"Where do you see that in the Bible?" he said.

I responded: "Over and over throughout Scripture, we see God condemning oppression and working to help people who are vulnerable and oppressed—people who are poor, or ethnic minorities, for example. Jesus does this too, in his ministry—I believe that oppression is one of the sins Jesus was most against—not queerness. In fact, I would say Jesus thinks the oppression of queer people is wrong."

"But Jesus oppressed people," he said.

Shocked, I said, "What? What are you talking about?"

"Well, Jesus flipped the tables in the temple. That was oppression. Oppression of the people who were selling things!"

And here we are, this Sunday, at the story of Jesus flipping tables in the temple. I think people often have mixed feelings about this story. I think it's because we know that if we were there, it would have been a bit terrifying:

An angry man with a powerful presence walks into a religious space—in this case, the outermost court around the temple in Jerusalem, the only place where Gentiles are allowed to gather in the temple system—and he begins yelling and sweeping things off of tables and turning

the tables upside down. He grabs the bags of money and shakes them open onto the ground, the coins clinking and rolling along the stone. He cracks a whip and begins not-so-gently ushering the merchants out of the courtyard. Sheep and cows, suddenly freed from their sellers, begin mooing and baaing, running around, as doves flap about people's ears and shoulders.

For someone who's even the slightest bit conflict avoidant, it sounds incredibly stressful.

And we know that if somebody made a scene like this—say, in the New York City subway system—we would all be thinking there was something probably a bit wrong with them, and we would be feeling afraid and hoping somebody else would come in and stop them.

We're uncomfortable with this story, right? We're uncomfortable with Jesus' anger. We are uncomfortable because it seems like he has gone completely unhinged. We are uncomfortable because he causes a scene, and it's embarrassing, and everyone can see, and it inconveniences a lot of people.

One thing I learned as I was reading about this passage this week is that this was more than simply an inconvenience. If all the tables were flipped over, and the moneychanging stations were shut down, and the animals were running loose—that meant no one could buy offerings to bring into the temple. It meant that worship for that day was completely shut down. There would be no offerings. There would be no going inside to bring those offerings to God's presence. All those people who had traveled to sacrifice and to meet with God were now out of luck.

Is this what Jesus, of all people, wants?

Is Jesus, in fact, trying to oppress people?

There are a number of theories about why Jesus got so upset. In the other accounts of this story in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus quotes a Scripture that says, “‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a den of robbers.” Jesus is angry because he thinks what these salespeople are doing amounts to highway robbery. Why?

Imagine this: The temple is in Jerusalem, and faithful Jews are expected to make regular pilgrimages for the Passover to make offerings—offerings that are required to be unblemished animals. But they have to travel from all over the land of Israel, and it’s nearly impossible for them to bring their own animals and keep them in perfect condition along the way. So instead, they bring their money—often a foreign currency—and then they have to pay a fee to change the money into temple dollars. Then, finally, they would buy an animal at the temple.

What you might begin to see already is that this meant the sellers in the temple pretty much had a monopoly on sacrifices and their prices. They could make a significant profit if they wanted to, because where else were people going to get unblemished animals? And after making such a long journey, after walking or riding miles in the desert to come to the temple, to seek God—of course those people aren’t going to turn around if the prices are high. They will pay any price to meet with the God they are seeking. Even those who are poor and probably needed the money to spend on feeding themselves and their families.

Where do you see oppression in this story?

To me, it is clear: The sellers and the moneychangers are oppressing the poor who come to the temple seeking God. They are using people’s longing for God in order to make a profit.

Interestingly, in the Gospel of John, from which we read today, Jesus does not call these salespeople robbers. Instead, he says, in a literal translation, “You have turned the house of my Father into a house of trade.”

Perhaps even if they weren’t raising the prices exponentially—perhaps, for John, that’s not the point. Perhaps it’s the fact that they were looking to make a profit, any profit at all. Perhaps it’s that they saw worship as an opportunity to make money rather than to honor God. Perhaps it’s because in doing so, they were excluding those who could not afford it, rather than welcoming all who came seeking God.

Perhaps, as I said to that student at our welcome table in the student center, perhaps Jesus was protesting oppression rather than causing it.

Jesus was upset enough about this behavior that he was willing to shut down worship for a day. He was upset because the tables that should have been welcoming people, all people, to come and be with God, were instead tables being used to make money and to exclude those who couldn’t pay. So he flipped the tables. He flipped over those exclusionary tables, as if to say: It is worse to have tables of worship that exclude people than it is not to have worship at all.

The call we receive from Jesus today is to not block entrance to anyone who comes seeking God. The call we receive is to have an open table, a table that welcomes all. Whether that is a table covered in rainbow flags that welcomes people who have often been excluded, or a table set and ready for communion.

This is the table where we receive communion: a table that is open to anyone who comes, no matter what they believe or where they come from. It is a table of celebration, where each person is welcomed and embraced for who they are. It is a table where everything is free, where you don’t

have to bring anything to offer or to tithe, where it does not matter if you have money or if you don't. It is a table where no one is turned away.

And it is our responsibility, as people who have been embraced by God, as people who eat at this table, to welcome all to come and sit with us—not because of what they might have to offer us or what we might gain, but simply because God wants them to come eat at God's table too.

And this, I think, is the best image of the kingdom of a God: a table, where all are welcome, where all are gathered, where all can eat together and celebrate knowing they are fully loved and fully welcomed as they are.

Amen.

- In other accounts he says , “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’[a]? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’[b]”
- Tables:
 - Tabling at TCNJ
 - The tables Jesus flipped: those of the oppressors—tables for buying and selling, aka tables of exclusion, of shame, of not having enough or being enough, of blocking the entrance to God’s presence
 - The welcome table of communion
 - I know many of us have found ourselves walking on a path of grief in the last few years...
 - End with gesture to the table in the kingdom of God
- Is it a table that excludes or a table that welcomes? A table where you gain and exploit or a table where you give generously?
- What is our vision of God’s table?
- What makes us angry? People being welcomed at the table? Or people being excluded?
- They wanted people to come to their tables not to be welcomed or to worship God, but to get their money
- Was in the courtyard where Gentiles were allowed to be—took over their space