

Why Did Jesus Overturn the Tables? Mark 11:15-19

Mark 11:15-19 (The Message)

They arrived at Jerusalem. Immediately on entering the Temple Jesus started throwing out everyone who had set up shop there, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of the bankers and the stalls of the pigeon merchants. He didn't let anyone even carry a basket through the Temple. And then he taught them, quoting this text:

My house was designated a house of prayer for the nations;
You've turned it into a hangout for thieves.

The high priests and religion scholars heard what was going on and plotted how they might get rid of him. They panicked, for the entire crowd was carried away by his teaching.

At evening, Jesus and his disciples left the city.

At first glance, this is one of those stories that seems like a slam dunk.

Jesus walks into Jerusalem — sees what is going on — that the merchants are taking advantage of the pilgrims — ghetto gauging, if you will — he gets angry. Turns over the tables and says NO MORE!!

The modern church has applied this story by saying that because of this, Jesus is teaching us that we should not sell things in the church. No shares of stock for the youth, no UMW luncheon tickets, no fish fry tickets.

That's what the story says — RIGHT?
Well, not so fast.

Let's look a little more carefully at our story.

First of all, this is one of those stories that is found in all four Gospels. The synoptic gospels all locate this story at the beginning of what you and I now call "Holy Week" — the last week of Jesus' life. John locates this story very differently.

In John's gospel, this story is found in Chapter 2, right after the story of Jesus turning water into wine at Cana. It is clearly out of place, because this story was one of the events that turned the temple leaders against Jesus. It is pretty clear that it did not happen twice, but just once and toward the end of his life.

So John has it there for another reason — but that is not important for us this morning.

I want us to look carefully at Mark's version of this story and try to understand what it is all about. So that we can understand WHY Jesus overturned the tables.

Chapter 11 begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem on what we call PALM SUNDAY.

Mark, like Matthew and Luke is trying to demonstrate with that story just what kind of a messiah Jesus is. A messiah who comes not for the elite — not for the establishment — but a messiah who comes for all people.

That day ends with Jesus going back to Bethany because it was getting late.

The next day — as they are walking back toward Jerusalem Jesus sees a fig tree off in the distance.

Even though the story tells us that it was not the right time of year for figs to be growing on a tree — Jesus says to the tree: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

And then we get our story today:

They arrived at Jerusalem. Immediately on entering the Temple Jesus started throwing out everyone who had set up shop there, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of the bankers and the stalls of the pigeon merchants. He didn't let anyone even carry a basket through the Temple. And then he taught them, quoting this text:
My house was designated a house of prayer for the nations;
You've turned it into a hangout for thieves.

The high priests and religion scholars heard what was going on and plotted how they might get rid of him. They panicked, for the entire crowd was carried away by his teaching.

At evening, Jesus and his disciples left the city.

But then Mark tells us:

In the morning, walking along the road, they saw the fig tree, shriveled to a dry stick. Peter, remembering what had happened the previous day, said to him, "Rabbi, look—the fig tree you cursed is shriveled up!"

Why am I giving you this lesson in Mark's gospel?

Because it is important!

Mark has taken the story of the “cleansing of the temple” and framed it with the story of the fig tree.

Mark does this throughout his Gospel and whenever he does this, he does it because he has something important that he wants us to understand. Mark frames a story around another one in order to help us to understand what the central story really means. He uses the frame story to interpret the central story.

So if that is what he is doing — what might the cleansing of the temple story mean when it is framed by the cursing of the fig tree?

Well the first question that we ask is: Why does Jesus curse the fig tree? It makes no sense — it was not the season for figs, so why would Jesus seem to get upset that it is not producing?

Unfortunately, I have already set you up.

Just in the way that I described the fig tree story we make it sound like Jesus is mad at the tree — disappointed that it is not producing.

But I don’t believe that is what Jesus is doing or saying.

Jesus is using the fig tree to represent the religious institution of his day. And he curses it to point out that the institution — the temple and its bureaucracy is no longer producing the fruit that God created it to produce.

And when Jesus shifts our attention to the moneychangers at the temple — He is not angry that they are selling outside the temple. The selling of sacrifices and the exchanging of money was essential to be faithful to the temple.

- person would travel from Galilee and need to buy a dove or a lamb for a sacrifice. It was a necessary reality.
- In the same way, a person would have to take their coins - which were probably Roman and would have had the image of Caesar on it, and exchange it for an acceptable coin so that they could make their offering without offending — without breaking the commandment on graven images — to God.

What Jesus is angry about is that the temple is failing in its mission to God.

What does God want of us?

(Micah 6:8 NRSV) He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what

does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

But the temple had stopped being the temple and Jesus is saying — that soon, soon the temple will be just like the fig tree — withered and dead.

But before we get too self-righteous — we need to turn the mirror on ourselves. Do we — God's church — God's people — do we represent the image that God wants us to portray?

I bet we all have had or have known of someone that whenever somebody comes to them moaning or complaining that they would reply: "Try to imagine how little I care."

In the past week I have presided over three funerals — and at each of the funerals there had been somebody (often not the family) who has come up and engaged me in a conversation about the church. They came up to question to me the value and the purpose of the church because in their mind the church has repeatedly said to them: "Try to imagine how little I care."

There was the former catholic who was angry and frustrated over the sexual abuse cases that have ripped about the catholic church — and all they feel from the spiritual leaders of that denomination is: "Try to imagine how little I care."

Or there was the former United Methodist who grew up in the church and saw pastor after pastor come and go. It seemed to them that every time they got to personally know the pastor — to personally invest themselves into the life of the pastor — the conference would come along and move them to another church. And as they struggled with the WHY questions the only answer they felt from the denomination was: "Try to imagine how little I care."

Or the person who had gone through a traumatic breakup of their marriage. And instead of listening to them, instead of loving them — they perceived the church as saying "get your marriage back together — or leave" and when they tried to find people to dialog with about their marriage all they heard was: "Try to imagine how little I care."

What would do you think Jesus would say to the Church today?
To what would he compare it?

We do have a clue — in the book of Revelation, written some 80 or so years after Jesus' death — John when he received his revelation from God says that he heard Jesus confront the budding church.

(Revelation 3:15-17 NRSV) "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. {16} So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. {17} For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Jesus says the church has said too long: "Try to imagine how little I care."

That the church must become a place where people know that we care.

And I hope and pray that in each of the instances this past week when I have had the opportunity to represent YOU the church that I have carried the message that WE DO CARE!

These past few weeks I have thought a lot about the church. What our purpose is — why we need to exist in the world.

And I keep going back to the phrase that I used in my prayer last Sunday — that God wants us to be a family. A family that cares about each other — a family that rallies around each other. A family that celebrates the good things that happen without getting jealous of each other. And a family that cries and holds each other during the hard times in life (without saying I told you so). A family that loves — truly loves each other.

Why did Jesus overturn the tables in the temple?

To tell us not to sell anything in church? NO

To tell us not to take advantage of each other? MOST LIKELY

To tell us that if we are not alive — if we are not doing — being the church — that we are withered and dead. ABSOLUTELY

I want to close with a parable that I came across this week:

One day a man went into the bus station in Athens, Georgia, to buy a ticket to Greenville, South Carolina.

The ticket clerk told the man that the bus was running late, so, to pass the time, the man walked around the terminal. He came upon a machine on which was a sign that claimed it could tell your name, age, hometown and so forth.

Inquisitively, the man put a quarter in the slot, and instantly a ticket popped out that read: "Your name is Bill Jones. You are 35 years old. You live in Athens, Georgia, and you are waiting for a bus to Greenville, South Carolina. The bus is late."

The man was dumbfounded. How did this machine know such facts? So he reached into his pocket, pulled out another quarter and inserted it in the machine. Another ticket came out that read: "Your name is still Bill Jones. You are still 35 years old. You still live in Athens, Georgia, and you are still waiting for a bus to Greenville, South Carolina. But it is behind schedule."

The man was astounded. How could this be? He decided on a ruse to fool the machine.

He walked across the street into a dime store and bought a pair of Groucho Marx glasses with an exaggerated nose and moustache. He also bought a pair of fake ears, a funny hat and a cane. Wearing his silly disguise and walking with a limp, he returned to the bus terminal and approached the little machine. He feebly inserted a quarter and waited for the machine's response.

Out it came and it read: "Your name is still Bill Jones. You are still 35 years old. You are still from Athens, Georgia, and you are waiting for a bus to Greenville, South Carolina. While you were fooling around, you missed the bus!"

Too often that is the church — we are too busy messing around — too busy trying to hide — too busy trying to be somebody else — and because of that we miss the opportunity to be the church!

Jesus gives us this story to call us back to what we are supposed to be:

(Micah 6:8 NRSV) what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

God wants us to be a family. And if we are, then we will never be a withered tree, or have the need to have our lives turned upside down.