

## *Again and Again, We are Shown the Way*

It was business as usual that day. Jesus showed up at the temple. Jesus showed up at the temple. Animals were being bought and sold. Coins were being changed. All the usual people had their usual places and usual roles.

This is one of those stories that we need to set aside a couple of things, things that don't belong, things that distract, before we can really understand what is happening. We need to set aside what we have often been told or thought this story is about so we can hear it again, maybe for the first time.

I don't think this story is simply about Jesus getting angry. Jesus got angry. I get angry. It's ok to get angry. That misses the point. There's more to this story than that. And I don't think it's about the animals or the moneychangers being in the temple. Jesus surely had to have known they were there. He grew up as a faithful Jew going to the temple. He didn't show up this day and say, "Wow! There are animals and moneychangers here. I didn't know this. This is wrong." The animals and moneychangers had always been there. That's how the system worked. It was business as usual for them to be there.

I think Jesus went to the temple that day for one purpose; to throw out and overturn business as usual. There are times when we need the tables of our life overturned and the animals thrown out. It's just so easy to fall into the trap of business as usual.

Have you ever pushed the auto-pilot button and life became mechanical? You go through the motions. You show up but you're not really there. That's business as usual.

How about this? Have you ever smiled that I'm good and everything is fine smile but behind the smile there was an emptiness, you felt hollow and your heart was breaking? That's carrying on with business as usual.

Or maybe you wake up in the morning and you are as exhausted as you were when you went to bed the night before. Business as usual. Have you ever felt like you were just not yourself? Nothing seemed right? Boredom overcame creativity. There was no enthusiasm, wonder, or imagination. It was just business as usual.

Sometimes we look at life and the world and it all seems in vain. We're busy but not really getting anywhere. There's no depth or meaning, only business as usual. Business as usual can happen anywhere: in friendships, marriages, parenting, work, church.

The things I just described are not, however, the problem. They are the symptom in the same way that the animals and moneychangers in the temple are not the problem. They are the symptoms of something deeper going on. The problem is not so much in the temple as it is in the human heart.

That deeper issue is, I think, what gives rise to business as usual. Sometimes it's about our fear. We're fearful about what is happening in our life or the uncertainty of the future and we want some type of security and predictability so we can keep on doing the same old things.

Business as usual is predictable and steady but it creates only the illusion of security. Sometimes business as usual is a symptom of our grief and sorrow. Something has been lost. We can't get back the life we want so we cling to business as usual because it's familiar and we want some stability.

Other times we are so busy and worn out making a living that life turns into one task after another, one appointment after another, a never ending to do list, and it's business as usual. Maybe we've taken people, relationships, and things for granted. Maybe we've lost our sense of gratitude, wonder or mystery.

I don't say any of that as a criticism or judgement of you, me or anyone else. I'm just naming what often happens to us.

I think that's why the Alabama Clergymen's letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was written. They wanted things to go back to the way they were. Business as usual.

Let's work it out in the courts, they argued. And in the meantime, let's obey peacefully the laws already in place. They understood that there was an impatience in people who felt that their hopes are slow in being realized. But they were convinced that those demonstrations were unwise and untimely.

Well, Martin Luther King was not having any of that and wrote back to them metaphorically flipping some tables. He wrote to them from the Birmingham jail. He said "In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the Gospel has no real concern." and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

He goes on to say, “I have looked at the beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of their massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?”

He finishes his letter saying, “There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

Whenever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators”. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated.

Let me say that again, They were too God intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated.

Let’s look at our art for today. It is entitled *Overturn* by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity



She writes this about her art: In 1965, my grandfather moved his family of six to Birmingham, Alabama to become the new senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church. Situated downtown, First Pres. sits only a few blocks away from 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, the site of the 1963 bombing attack by white supremacists who killed four young girls. Earlier that same year, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed eight prominent white clergy in his now famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

My grandfather’s predecessor was one of those clergy. They prompted King’s famous letter by requesting he appeal to law and order. In essence they said to him, “We agree with your movement, but your methods are too harsh. The demonstrations are destructive and causing too much backlash. You’re bringing agitators into our city. Wait for a better time and negotiate gently.”

This is the context in which my grandfather began his ministry with First Pres. While he helped the church change their policy to become open to worshipers of all races, a process that undoubtedly required much moral fortitude, I wonder how often he, too, felt the urge of his predecessor and the other white clergy who had written to Dr. King. I wonder how often he preferred for justice to happen slowly, gently and in an orderly manner. I think about how that urge lives in me too.

In this image, I wanted to freeze frame the destruction Jesus ignites, forcing us as viewers to focus on the process of dismantling and destroying an oppressive system. For those who willingly or unwillingly benefit from systems of oppression, it may feel threatening and terrifying to see them all come tumbling down. But for those held within the unrelenting grip of injustice, it must be completely and utterly liberating.

Again and again, Jesus shows us that his movement is about overturning systems of oppression to bring forth God’s beloved community on earth. Again and again, liberation movements throughout history pursue this same goal. Will we join Jesus in the overturning, or like the disciples, question his methods?

Jesus, in our scripture for today, is upending the business as usual beliefs in the temple.

We too, as people of God, as Jesus-people, are called to be disturbed by holy anger against oppressive and unjust systems that drive people from God. Where is our holy anger and how will we use it to stop doing business as usual.

Maybe you have been disturbed to holy anger since the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass high school. Is your passion like that of Emma Gonzalez? Her passion against gun violence, along with the passion of other young people,

has disturbed a nation from complacency such that even large retailers, like Dick's Sporting Goods, have put corporate profit aside to remove assault rifles from their stores and to support reasonable gun restrictions.

Maybe your call is to follow the lead of these young people, to help amplify their voices calling for "No More!" The students asked, "What if all students spoke out for gun reform?" I'm wondering what if all adults spoke out for gun reform? Or at least what if all Christians could speak out – to say no more will we put guns before our children's safety.

Maybe your passion is something else. Maybe you are disturbed to holy anger against a continued indifference to climate change and its devastating effect to the earth, despite God's call to us to be good stewards.

Maybe you are driven by a passion to stand against those, including churches, that spew out hate speech – hate speech towards lesbians, gays and transgendered – hate speech toward immigrants and refugees – hate speech towards the black lives matter movement?

Maybe you are disturbed by the patriarchal system in the church and the world that fosters abuse against women and children, a system that allows one in four girls and one in seven boys to be abused before they reach the age of 18: A system that opens the door for at least one in five women – if not more, to be sexually harassed in the workplace.

Maybe you are angry about the fight for everyone to have free access to water, not just in Detroit but around the world?

Or maybe you are outraged that we are still fighting for a living wage of \$15 dollars an hour and republicans are offering \$10.

I don't know about you, but I am fuming about a person hanging a KKK flag in their window in Grosse Pointe to intimidate their neighbors of color.

Maybe you are outraged about what happened at the capitol on January 6 and the Republicans say we just need to move on already.

There are so many more systems, abuses, in our world today. Where is our passion? Where is your passion? Where is your holy anger? Because again and again, we are shown the way by Jesus. And Jesus calls us to be disturbed by those things that disturbed him – by the things that disturb God – and to allow that holy anger to drive us from business as usual to action that will bring God's justice to this world.

I close with this poem by Rev. Sarah Are entitled, "*Flipping Tables.*"

I woke up and realized I was sitting at a table that oppression built.  
The patriarchy made the food.  
Cheap labor sewed the tablecloth.  
The guest list was exclusive.  
Fear was the host.

And the people seemed happy.  
but the food tasted awful.  
Because milk and honey  
Are reserved for God's promised day.  
So hold onto your silverware,  
Because now that I see it,  
I can't unsee.

This table is about to be flipped. Amen.