

“Upside Down Tables and Tenets”
B, Lent Six; Palm Sunday; Mark 11:1-19
March 25, 2018; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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11 ¹⁻³ When they were nearing Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany on Mount Olives, he sent off two of the disciples with instructions: “Go to the village across from you. As soon as you enter, you’ll find a colt tethered, one that has never yet been ridden. Untie it and bring it. If anyone asks, ‘What are you doing?’ say, ‘The Master needs him, and will return him right away.’”

⁴⁻⁷ They went and found a colt tied to a door at the street corner and untied it. Some of those standing there said, “What are you doing untying that colt?” The disciples replied exactly as Jesus had instructed them, and the people let them alone. They brought the colt to Jesus, spread their coats on it, and he mounted.

⁸⁻¹⁰ The people gave him a wonderful welcome, some throwing their coats on the street, others spreading

out rushes they had cut in the fields. Running ahead and following after, they were calling out, Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in God’s name!

Blessed the coming kingdom of our father David!
Hosanna in highest heaven!

¹¹ He entered Jerusalem, then entered the Temple. He looked around, taking it all in. But by now it was late, so he went back to Bethany with the Twelve.

The Cursed Fig Tree

¹²⁻¹⁴ As they left Bethany the next day, he was hungry. Off in the distance he saw a fig tree in full leaf. He came up to it expecting to find something for breakfast, but found nothing but fig leaves. (It wasn’t yet the season for figs.) He addressed the tree: “No one is going to eat fruit from you again—ever!” And his disciples overheard him.

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ At evening, Jesus and his disciples left the city.

I. PALMS, PARADE, PASSION, PARADOX

Talk about a rollercoaster! This day is one of contrasts. Of highs and lows, ups and downs. Palms, parade, passion, paradox.

It doesn't get better than a parade, does it?! Especially when there's a new promising leader on the scene. There's so much hope in the air! Maybe *this* one. *This* guy will be the one to save us. The one God has promised—maybe he's finally the real deal—the Magnificent Messiah!

Imagine the myriad thoughts and emotions the disciples must have been feeling! There's *their* Jesus, getting on his high horse—finally! Finally gonna kick some _____. Oh wait! He's *not* on a high horse. He's on a little beast of burden. How's he going to kick some Romans out of there on a little lowly donkey?

Will Willimon muses:

“Though Mark does not explicitly say which two disciples went and got the animal, at least one scholar suspects that it may have been James and John. Just a few hours before, these were the two disciples who had said to Jesus, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory,’ and now here they are on **donkey detail**. Some glory!” And yet, this is what must be done before Jesus can make his entry.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of an emotional and political roller coaster that is Holy Week. We need to fasten our seatbelts, or strap ourselves into the saddle, as the case may be. Hold onto the reins on that donkey. Hold on to Jesus and don't let go!

Remember, last week, when we realized Jesus didn't *have* to “face Jerusalem?” Didn't *have* to face toward what he knew would be full of struggle and conflict, even death. He could have turned and run for the Galilean hills, led a pleasant life—maybe as a shepherd with a little teaching and preaching and healing vocation on the side.

Now he's plunging in to the midst of it all, and we are about to witness a week of contrasts that might give us whiplash!

II. JESUS GETS ANGRY—TURNS OVER TABLES

In Mark, as we have been learning this Lent, things happen quickly, one upon another. And then....and immediately.....and next!

Well, Jesus no sooner finishes his parade route and all that glory and celebration and calling him Savior of us all, then the next morning he's *hungry* and frankly a little testy. He meets up with the Golden Arches Fig Tree, and finds it's not serving breakfast yet. And wow! It's not pretty, that mood. Well, maybe it's just before coffee and we should give him some slack.

That whole Fig Tree Incident needs its very own sermon. It's one of the most puzzling episodes in the bible, so we'll set it aside for another day.

But, it is curious how here in Mark's relating the order of things, Jesus comes right from being hungry, not finding breakfast, and launches into some upsetting table-turning!

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basket through the Temple. And then he taught them, quoting this text:

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Doyle spoke of this "turning over the tables in the Temple" a few weeks ago, in his excellent message called "Tending the Temples." He explained then that the Gospel of John, unlike the other three gospels, places this episode at the *start* of Jesus' ministry.

Doyle said that Jesus, in this action in the Temple was telling us some very important things about temples, worship and the need to look intently and intentionally at what we do there and here.

Doyle: "Why does Jesus Take the actions He did? Indeed He knows full well what the fall-out from these actions will be. He is fully aware of the eventual outcome of His ministry on earth. The why—Jesus was demonstrating to those closest to Him as well as those He encountered, that a *new* way of worship, a *new* law of God—was the true outcome of His ministry. He was establishing a *new* and more *profound* connection and worship experience with God than had ever existed. And a beautiful law and worship experience it was to prove to be and continues to be.

And he encouraged us to “tend to the temples in your life—physical and spiritual.” For that is absolutely core to who we are as followers of Christ.

Today, in Mark, we find Jesus “tending the Temple” near the *end* of his ministry. And we ask ourselves again, *why?* And, what are we to learn further about this new way of being, of worshiping, that Jesus is demonstrating?

For starters, it’s a study in contrasts that begins here at the beginning of the week and plays out throughout the week and far beyond.

For it is literally the next day, after Jesus has been smiling, waving and enjoying a wonderful, warm welcome as he rides into the city—the hopes and fears of all the years coming to meet him—hoping they’ve found the Messiah.

And now. He’s angry. Seething. The smiles and waves have been converted into shoves and shouting a righteous protest. For Jesus has come upon something that is just not right. In a holy place. In the Temple yard—what should be the most honorable and upright place of all.

And we don’t know what to do with an angry Jesus. We are taken aback by the parade-waver-turned-table-knocker. An interesting note that you might not have caught before: Jesus didn’t just walk in to the Temple yard on Monday morning having never seen this disturbing sight before. He might well have been

stewing on it all night. Mark says that after the parade on Sunday, before they depart to Bethany for the night,

¹¹ He entered Jerusalem, then entered the Temple. He looked around, *taking it all in*.

Was Jesus seeing that sight all night? Tossing and turning, ruminating over the injustice, the extortion, the bilking of the poor and vulnerable; concocting a plan of response, a protest march, between bouts of fitful sleep? When we “look around and take it all in” and see disturbing things, it does tend to keep us up at night. Jesus knows that feeling.

My friend and colleague Rev. Karen Winkel, says we *need* to see that Jesus *does* gets angry, and that we should too. That the faithful response is to take our discomfort with that “other side” of Jesus and practice a “Stewardship of Anger”—to see why he’s angry and respond.

She explains what’s happening this way:

“Scoping out this scene, how could Jesus *not* be angered and outraged? Especially when he understood himself to be the living, breathing access point of the Holy, the *new* temple, if you will. Someone through whom anyone could encounter God--free of charge, anywhere, day or night.

In the midst of so much discord and ire, we want Jesus to be our Good Shepherd, our Prince of Peace. We want him to bring comfort, not confrontation.

But, as the Irish Jesuit Fr. Donal Neary writes in a poem called *True Religion*,

God asks us in Jesus
to share his anger
when in his name
people's dignity is diminished,
or love is abused,
or the poor are exploited
or when he himself is neglected.
This is true religion:
to act justly,
love tenderly
and walk humbly with our God.

Jesus is one who turns tables upside down. Who is gentle, loving, compassionate, yet also angry when people are being harmed. Indignant when justice is far from being practiced—especially in religious settings.

When a scene is just plain wrong, Jesus does not shy away, walk away, turn a blind eye or ear. He turns the tables over. Takes a stand. Tells those who would exploit and oppress that this is *not* what God the Father and Mother intended and things need to change!

III. WHAT TABLES NEED TO BE TURNED OVER?

What needs to turn upside down in your life? In what you see when you look around? In your interactions? Are there places where “the way things are” is *not* okay? Not respectful to the Holy One and those who earnestly seek to worship, serve and live?

Where are the tables around us supporting oppression and need to be challenged, upturned, overturned and healthy anger and even a little *chaos* brought to bear?

IV. JESUS GETS ON IT—TURNS OVER TENETS

Jesus is one who turns *tenets* upside down as well. Long-held beliefs, sacred cows, things we thought about “the way the world works; the *way things are*.”

Think for a moment of every belief or value or way of thinking that Jesus turns upside down—far beyond just clunky tables and pens of pigeons!

“The last shall be first; the first last” comes to mind easily. What are others?

There's some homework for us right there!

V. GOD'S INVERSIONS

David Lose calls these turned upside down tenets “God's Inversions” and gives some examples:

*Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life”

*Those who realize there is more to this life than the trinkets and fading accomplishments the world offers will enjoy eternal rewards.

“In these and other ‘inversions,’ Jesus invites us to consider with care what we have come to *value*, what we have come to accept as ‘the way of the world,’ what we have come to define as *desirable*.

Jesus promises that God is always at work, drawing *life* from *death*, calling what looks *shameful* something *beautiful*, turning *suffering* and *desolation* into a time and place of *revelation*.

We have a God “who continues to be at work wresting *life* from *death*, and who surprises us by being able to redeem even the deepest pain, assuring us that while God never desires that we suffer, yet God can work through that *suffering* for *good*.”

And the ultimate inversion that Christ lives out?

*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard **equality** with God as something to be exploited, but **emptied** himself, and took the form of a **slave**.* (Phil. 2:5-7)

CHRISTUS PARADOX

Sylvia Dunstan has written a profound piece entitled “Christus Paradox” portraying the seeming contradictions inherent in the one called the Christ. *Seeming*, because they incorporate *all* these inversions, and the fullness and “both/and” that Christ Jesus is and shows us to be. We will sing these in a moment, but hear them first and ponder as a prayer as we enter into this holiest of weeks:

You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd.
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peacemaker and sword-bringer
Of the way you took and gave.
You the everlasting instant;
You, whom we both scorn and crave.

Clothed in light upon the mountain,
Stripped of might upon the cross,
Shining in eternal glory,
Beggar’d by a soldier’s toss,
You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are both gift and cost.

You, who walk each day beside us,
Sit in power at God’s side.
You, who preach a way that’s narrow,
Have a love that reaches wide.
You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are our pilgrim guide.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus!
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!
Worthy your defeat and vict’ry.

Worthy still your peace and strife.

You, the everlasting instant;

You, who are our death and life.

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

You, who are our death and our life.

As we enter into Holy Week, *look* for the paradox that is Jesus Christ. Look for the inversions of God that Christ lives out. Look for the tables that get turned over, the ways of the world that get turned upside down. The hollow promises and values, the corners of “status quo” which Jesus declares to be *not* the Way. *Not* the path of abundant and loving life; *not* the road of the Kingdom of God where our neighbor is beloved, and everyone is a neighbor.

Let us pray on this Palm Sunday:

True and humble king,

hailed by the crowd as Messiah:

grant us the faith to know you and love you,

that we may be found beside you on the way of the cross,

which is the path of glory. Amen.