

3 Lent YB 2024

Overturning the Tables as Performance Art

By the Rev. Salying Wong

[Props: temple, wine, table, coins]

It is the Passover. Like many fellow Jews, Jesus goes to the temple.

[Place model of temple on one side of the rail. Start opposite.] The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke place the scene of the “cleansing of the temple” near the end of their story. Jesus comes into Jerusalem and rides his donkey all the way to the temple compound gates. He enters the Court of the Gentiles, goes up to the tables of the moneychangers and flips over the tables. And, he calls the money changers, “a den of robbers.” This scene for the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, becomes the last straw for the religious establishment. They decide to kill him.

[Move the temple model to the other side of the rail.] The Gospel of John places the moneychanger scene near the beginning of the Gospel, right after the first sign at Cana. [Put up a bottle of wine.] One function of placing the moneychanger scene here is to interpret the sign at Cana. Remember that at the wedding in Cana, when the guests ran out of wine, Jesus turned six huge stone jars of water into wine (John 2:9.). Each of these jars held up to 30 gallons. Today, this would mean over 900 bottles of wine! Not only that, it was the best wine anyone ever had. The signs in the Gospel of John aren’t revelatory in and of themselves; rather, they begin the process of inquiry. The questions people would have asked are these: Who is this who could change water into wine, why the abundance, and why is it the best wine?

In the Gospel of John, after a sign is performed, there is a discourse that fleshes out the inquiry. But the discourses can be confusing because they are not

straight-forward. Sometimes they are more like artwork than treatise. Today's scene of the moneychangers serves as a discourse and it is like a piece of performance art. I remember the first time I went to a performance art show. I spent half an hour watching a woman drink from a fire hydrant and the next half hour hearing screeching violins *unmake* music. Performance art leaves you scratching your head, shaking your head, and not always in a pleasant way. It is evocative, but more so, it is provocative. I imagine Jesus today doing a piece of provocative performance art as a discourse to the questions that came from the sign at Cana.

Here's the temple in Jerusalem. Only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the high priest makes an offering inside the temple, in the Holy of Holies, sprinkling the blood for the expiation of sins through the life of another being. Most of the time, the sacrifice or burnt offerings of animals and grains are done outside, here at this altar. Here is where you find the slaughterhouses for the animals. All of this is walled off. Male Israelites can be inside these walls.

Attached to this is another enclosure called the Court of Women. And then all around within the largest set of walls is the Court of Gentiles. Here is where the moneychangers exchanged your Roman coin with Augustus' image to an image-free shekel. You use shekel for your offerings at the treasury and for buying the animals for the priests to burn. All around here is a marketplace.

I imagine Jesus walking in saying, "Excuse me. May I have your attention? Please gather around for this pop-up art experience." Then he begins his performance art. [Mime/dance this part] Jesus says "In the beginning was the Word (gesture to himself) and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among you. Therefore..." [Gently, pick up the table and let the coins slide off. Turn it upside down gently. Take the model of the temple and hold it close to the body.] Concluding, Jesus says, "Stop making my father's house into a marketplace." After a pause, Jesus bows to end his performance.

I can imagine the crowd murmuring, “Why is art so hard to understand?!” Perhaps a moneychanger remarks, “Wow, I totally thought he was going to call us a den of robbers. Cause, that would make sense. Not that I would be dishonest, but I can see theoretically that it can happen. But Jesus said, ‘Stop making my father’s house into a marketplace.’ Now I’m totally confused.”

It is confusing because the Temple is a marketplace. The market is vital to help people to get their offerings and perform the rituals and celebrate the festivals. Now, how did the Jews of the Second Temple understand the meaning of the temple? It is not that they thought that the sacrifices are merely transactional. That is, I give God a sacrifice and God gives me forgiveness. No, the temple represents the steadfast presence of God and the covenant that God would be their God and they would be God’s people. The offerings represented the people’s repentance whenever they strayed from this trust through acts that hurt others or themselves (sins). In Hebrew, the word for repentance means “return”. In their offerings, the people sought to return to the covenant, that is to trust God’s steadfast love. Now what is Jesus saying? Without the market, the temple would not be able to function. Is he talking about the temple or is he talking about himself?

The temple authorities gather around and yell, “Look at the mess your art has made! Did you get a permit for this?”

Jesus says, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up!” Again, is he talking about the temple or talking about himself?

“What?! It took forty-six years to build the temple. And you can rebuild it in three days?”

This is what happens when you take art literally. But the disciples, after Jesus' resurrection, would remember that he called himself tabernacled-flesh and would figure that Jesus was talking about himself. Today, in this temple scene, Jesus

utters the central provocative assertion of the Gospel of John: Jesus is the temple of the Holy; Jesus is God in flesh tabernacled among us.

To those who were there on that day, Jesus' assertion was absurd. Even his disciples could only understand after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, that Jesus was not talking about the literal temple of brick and mortar, but the living temple of his flesh tabernacled among them. For those who were reading the Gospel 30 years after the Romans destroyed the temple, when Judaism reorganized and considered how God's presence is experienced away from the temple, the community of John looked to the ascended Christ as their new temple. For us today, we continue to ponder the questions, "How do I experience the presence of God in my life? What does it look like, feel like in my own flesh? What does it mean to me to have a living relationship with Jesus?" Yes, even now, we are invited to keep following the directions and questions that come from the signs.

