

Exodus 20:1-20

¹ And God spoke all these words:

² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³ “You shall have no other gods before^l me.

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ “You shall not murder.

¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ “You shall not steal.

¹⁶ “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

¹⁸ When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

John 2:13-25

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” ²⁰ They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. ²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

“Turning the Tables”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

To turn the tables is an expression we’ve all probably heard, and maybe, like me, have never really thought about, at least regarding its origin. I’m sure that if you haven’t, my mentioning it just now has you believing what I wondered. Is this a biblical reference? The answer is no, it is a backgammon reference. Still, in many ways, I believe that what Jesus does in the temple in this story might well be a way of understanding this figurative expression. In the game of backgammon, or any other board game that involves similar importance of one’s position on the board, to “turn the tables” is to have one player take the current position of the other, in order to finish out the game from the new position. The first known example of the figurative use of the phrase in print is in Robert Sanderson's *XII sermons*, 1634: "Whosoever thou art that dost another wrong, do but turn the tables: imagine thy neighbour were now playing thy game, and thou his."

What does it mean to follow Jesus? How are our tables turned when we make a walk of discipleship? It's worth thinking of this Lent . . . This incident was not just about the temple, but about the connection between the secular—imperial Rome—and the sacred, the temple.

John 2:14's use of the word temple refers most directly to the outer part—where indeed, there was commerce and the changing of money. John 2:21, when Jesus refers to the temple as his body, he uses the Greek word for the inner building; the temple itself. If we again think of the idea of turning the tables as reversing position, we find ourselves with a really interesting figurative use of the temple placement. We move from outside in. God moves from outside us, or existing as worshipped only in the temple to being present in us, first in Jesus, but in humanity rather than in a building, in only one place.

What Jesus does is shocking to us, isn't it? We stumble over this passage, because the Jesus it depicts isn't as easy to swallow as the one who welcomed children to him; who healed and whose driving out is of, well, demons and misery. "And so Kierkegaard could say, "Christianity has taken a giant stride into the absurd," and later, "Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them." We don't particularly want to have our tables turned by Christ, do we? But I would say that Christianity IS disruptive, you know, but not if we try to make it less than shocking.

What does all of this have to do with Jesus and us? Our tables are turned when we begin to allow that following Jesus might include more than obediently following the ten commandments. If we think about what Jesus asks of us in summarizing the law as loving God and our neighbor as ourselves, we may find that *the reversal of roles with our usual opponents* is more difficult than we think. We may find that being called to righteous anger, knowing God within humanity requires of us a different song than quiet complacency.

If to love is to do God's will, then our loving net must be thrown wide. If our lives are a game of sorts in our discipleship in Christ, we have a lot of work to do in order to understand the position of those on the outside. What outer tables have to

be upended in order for us to be open to God on the inside? During our Lenten journey, while we may and must pay close attention to honoring the ways in which our commandment to love is indicated in the commands to honor God and each other, even as represented in the 10 Commandments, we may also use this time to regard more closely how Jesus' summary of the law calls us to even more.

Whom do we love, and how? If we are to turn the tables and try to see life through the eyes of our opponents, how might we change? We have to be careful in looking at this passage from John not to make the upending only about religion. Imperial Rome had its hands in the pot of the outer temple, and our own upending may be as much political as it is religious. The opponents with whose positions we may need to trade could likewise be political—or they could be in our own places of business, or in our homes. Those whose positions we might need to see more clearly, which is a farther look at what our turning tables might mean, these people might be those whose lives we can barely imagine, because they are out of our immediate view. If we are comfortable, we may need most particularly to understand the walk of the uncomfortable in our Lenten journey to love better, as we are commanded to love. If we are comfortable, we may need most particularly not just to understand, but to *walk with* the uncomfortable. Then, in a total upending of our lives, which is the entry of God in Christ into our lives, we may find that our usual way of doing things just doesn't suit us any more.

To know hunger through fast may allow us to know the position of the hungry; to know God in prayer may allow us to know where we have made God absent at other times; to know those who are imprisoned whether through incarceration following a crime, or the more subtle imprisonment of addictions, we may learn the ways in which we also are not free. Of course we do not become imprisoned in the same way as those for whom we pray and know in our prayers. Still, if we want to know God in each person and in life's every moment, we need to be able to see that God is present in the lives of the uncomfortable just as much as God is present in aspects of ease.

God, who is to be honored and obeyed, with the helpful requirements to do and to avoid that are given in the Ten Commandments, lives here among us if we open our eyes to see. In Rob Bell's provocative book, *Love Wins*, Bell investigates current notions of heaven and hell—and most provocatively the notion of who gets

in or doesn't—to each place. If we think of our walk of Lent as preparation, not only for Easter, but also for life eternal, Bell's discussion of Jesus' teaching about the beggar Lazarus and the rich man can help us to see a clear path. The rich man, you may recall, finds himself tormented by thirst in hell. He knows that Lazarus has gone to heaven, and asks that Lazarus might bring him water to quench his thirst. Even in death, the rich man is unwilling or unable to reverse his position. He continues to want Lazarus to serve him.

Bell's point is more far-ranging than this single example. In reminding us of Jesus' story of the rich man ignoring Lazarus' needs, he shares about an individual ignoring an individual's needs for comfort, but he also extends his discussion to a more global context. If all rich men were to ignore the needs of the poor, then there is hell on earth for the poor, and hell forever for the rich. Lazarus has endured his hell on earth, but has heaven eternally. The rich man has had his riches already, but has stored up nothing for later, as we might borrow from Jesus' words in another chapter.

And what do we do? Are we able to let go of any of our current comfort in order *really* to understand the position of another? Do we, in loving widely and well, contribute to the Reign of God arriving now for someone who needs our help, even if it means putting aside our own comfort for the time being? Do we trust that by obeying God's commandments, most especially in loving others—and I would add here by acting on their behalf—Do we trust that we will benefit both now and later?

Jesus turned the tables in so many ways—bringing into our story the importance of those simple people whose faith healed them; whose care for Jesus comforted him; by bringing into our story the truth that sometimes those in power don't have the answers we need to do God's will. God's righteous anger has its place in our lives, if we would respond not by trying to squelch the anger, but to erase the need. What are we doing this Lent to love others so well that the situations that must cause God pain are turned around? Let us pray:

Oh, loving and upending God, strengthen us to do your will. Be with us as we examine our lives in this time of Lent so that we may be of service and, so, may be people of hope. In your name we pray. Amen