

Overturning the tables.

Ishmael: "He is he gone yet? (*Ishamael is behind the pulpit out of sight.*)

Mark: Is who gone?

Ishmael: The crazy guy. (*Ishamael sticks his head up and looks around*)

Mark: What crazy guy?

Ishamel: You know the one that came charging through here with a big whip, yelling crazy things and turning over all our tables.

Mark: Oh, you mean that guy from Nazareth. I think they said his name was Jesus. Yeah, Ishmael, he's gone. You can come out now.

Ishamael: Are you sure? (*Ishamael stands up*)

Mark: Yes, come on out. Are you ok?

Ishamael: I think so. I was reaching for my money box, you know the one I keep my temple coins in, when he whacked me on the hand with that whip. That left a huge mark, but I don't think anything is broken.

(*He looks at the congregation*) I don't understand. There I was just doing my business in the courtyard of the Gentiles and this nut case comes in. I mean how is the temple supposed to function without the other merchants and myself. Especially me. I'm a money changer and people come from all over and have all kinds of coins. Most of them can't be used to pay the temple tax or buy the sin and thank offerings. They have pictures of Caesar whom the Romans claim is divine and that violates several commandments. So people have to come to me and get proper temple money. Now I do charge for the service, I mean a guy has to make a living doesn't he? But without all us money changers, the temple could not function.

And what about poor Isaac over there. His doves have all flown away when the cages got smashed. He had the best doves, there are always perfect. You know people have come from a long way off and most of them only get to the temple every few years. So when they have a chance to make a sin offering they want the best. That's important to offer a perfect sacrifice to God. That's how the system works.

And will you look at the mess. My money is all over the ground. Some of it is mixed in the Abraham's money who had the stall next to me. I don't know how I'll sort it out. You know he is a bit of a cheat. He charges more than I do and doesn't always give the right rate.

Mark: Well it's ok now. Pick up your money and set your table back up. Don't worry the people will be back soon. It is close to Passover and regardless of that nut case the temple needs to keep going.

Ishmael: Well thanks I'll get back to work. Oy what a mess!"

Ishmael then leaves

Yes our friends the moneychangers and merchants in the temple were totally confused and the priests were livid with Jesus. For Ishmael over here was right, they were just doing business as usual. There is a version of the Tanuch, the Jewish bible that includes the Torah, that has listed inside in an appendix a list of all the sin and thank offerings. This is what the business of those in the court of the Gentiles was and it was absolutely necessary for the entire temple structure to function. These offerings were required for a person to be "right" with God. Some commentaries have remarked that the moneychangers were charging exorbitant rates, and that might be so, but this is not what Jesus was worried about. So yes our friend Ishmael was just doing what was expected. It was Jesus that acted in an unexpected manner by upsetting the system.

That however was the point that Jesus was making. John in his gospel offers the most complete story of the cleansing of the temple and places it early the story rather than in the context of what we now call Holy Week. Why?

Historically the other three gospels probably have the sequence right, but John is not about history, but about theology. In John's gospel Jesus knows exactly who he is and what he is to do. At the top of his agenda is upsetting the status quo in a variety of ways. Jesus is attacking not just the poor merchants, but is turning over the tables on the entire temple system. This is the temple he will tear down and will build a new temple, a new system in three days when he is crucified and resurrected. John places this statement early to frame everything else that Jesus does. Jesus is calling for nothing less than the total reform of Judaism in John's gospel.

Please remember that John's gospel was written in the late 90s after the council of Jamnia where the Jewish leaders declared that anyone who professed Jesus as Christ was no longer considered Jewish. John's community has been kicked out of the synagogue, excommunicated if you will. This plays into the spin that the author of John uses.

The pairing of this story with the 10 commandments in our lectionary was not done by accident. Jesus came not to overturn the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus was upset because the worship of the temple was all about form and doing things correctly. Follow the commandments (all 615 of them) and all will be right. If you break them, then do the proper offerings and all is right again with God.

The problem was that for many what was in the person's heart was not important. The ritual was everything. This is why in John, Jesus compares the Jewish leadership to white washed sepulchers Shiny and gleaming on the outside, but filled with decay and death on the inside. Jesus was saying that what is inside is what is important. Sin offerings meant nothing without true repentance.

This turns us to a question for today. The 7 deadly words in church are, "We have always done it that way." Jesus is challenging us to look at what we have always done and ask, is this what Jesus would have us do.

The question for today is what tables in our temple would Jesus come in and overturn. The Holy Spirit has in fact shaken up the church several times in the past. If you look at history every 500 years or so we have so restrained the Spirit, so confined the word of God by structure and hierarchy that the Spirit blows it all up. 500 years ago it was the Reformation started by Martin Luther when he blew up the temple system of indulgences which sound a lot like what was going on in the temple when Jesus stepped in during his life.

What if today we are in the midst of the next great reformation? What if the problem is that organized religion has organized the Spirit out of itself? As we move forward as a parish, as a diocese with a new bishop, as a national church, what if we step back and ask, what tables need to be overturned. What do we need to do differently now than in the past. It is a breath taking concept and one that can apply not only to our church, but to our society. What an opportunity we have to make major systemic change as the temples that we have known have collapsed.

There is a book I that I have just read called Changing the Conversation. It is a new way to look at churches and what church is about. The author asks, what business are we in and then how is business. Are we in the business of a nice club where we come on Sunday and politely discuss what is going on and then go home for the week? Many churches are in the membership business and business is not good for many in the mainstream. Or are we in the business of being positive agents of change in the name of Christ. Are we in the business of forming faithful apostles and servants of Christ? Are we in the business of doing the work of the Spirit?

I invite all of us to reflect on the tables in the temple and ask first and foremost, what tables in my life need to be overturned. And then move on to what tables do we need to overturn here at St. Aidan's and in our diocese. What is the Spirit calling us to do and more importantly, what is the Spirit calling us to be? As a community there may be no more important question for us to answer in the next 6 months to a year.

The world has radically changed in the last few years, but as an institution I fear we are behind the curve. In our post-modern world there are great opportunities for churches that are in the business of developing spirituality and faith. We are in a world searching for meaning. Meaning that we find in Christ's call to us as

Christians. How we go about that needs to change and that is the challenge that we have before us. So what are the tables that Christ is overturning in our temple?
Amen.