

Turning Tables
Lent 3B
March 8, 2015
John 2.13-22
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I am not a winter weather person. I like the idea of snow but not the reality of snow. When I lived in Virginia, I never remembered that ice forms on the windshield over night and would regularly use a kitchen spatula trying to scrape my windows to a satisfactory point of visibility. I dislike socks and coats and gloves. I am not fond of the way a cold wind hits and rushes through to the bone.

So when Spring is close and the days get very sunny and the least bit warm, I feel like I start to come alive. There's not a winter hibernation season here like many other parts of the country have, but there's a general mistrust that warm weather will last. A day at 85 and sunny becomes the next day's windchill of 32.

But this weekend is just sunny enough and just warm enough to make me hopeful, and that hopefulness means rubber boots and yard tools. Yesterday afternoon was spent in the sun. The kids opened new packages of sidewalk chalk, drug water pitchers back and forth from the hose to the place where they'd dug holes to create tiny ponds and river beds. I've had my eye on a patch of good sunlight for several months now and began to clear it for what will soon become a kitchen garden. For hours we hauled, dug, made messes, tracked mud through the kitchen. We lost track of time.

On afternoons like those and on days like today, it seems the all-as-it-should-be moments increase. We do things that bring us joy. We turn our screens off and see our neighbors across the fence. For me, it's in these restful tasks that I sense God's presence. I feel most fully myself. Time has disappeared. Children are creating and exploring and making tremendous messes. We discover earthworms and black soil where last year there was only hard dirt. Goodness abounds.

On Wednesday nights during Lent, a group of 25-30 meets and talks about prayer in various forms. A few days ago we talked about settings that enable us to sense God—listening to wonderful music, walking beneath great trees, lighting a candle and being still. This is a good time of year to reflect on what makes you feel whole, where you feel most yourself, how you encounter the Divine.

Today's gospel lesson raises many issues and valid questions. But at the heart of Jesus' words and actions is the question of where God can be found. Is it in the Temple? Is it only in Jerusalem? If God's very essence became embodied and walked around among us, would we notice?

While pondering this question, I decided it is likely one that many people asked. So I googled "Where can God be found?" and began to read answers on the top 10 links. The

very first was a sponsored link by mormon.org; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Their answer, "GOD is our Father in Heaven, who created us in His own image; like Him we are divine in our nature and purpose."

The next was everystudent.com who suggested God is hidden: "God exists outside our dimensions. He can exist outside of time and space as we know it. Therefore, it is difficult to "see" Him. We are like...flat people on the two-dimensional paper. We can't see what's in a third dimension."

The Celestial Church states, "God is a Spirit and can be found any place, anywhere, and anytime. He does not confine Himself to a remote out-of-reach Heaven: or does He limit Himself to Churches, synagogues, or temples. You can find Him on the mountain, in the valley, in the sky. On the sea, in your home, or any other place. At this very moment He surrounds you."

People have been asking about God's presence for a long time, and people have ordered their lives around the answers they discern. We are looking at a snapshot this morning of a 1st century scene as told and retold by people who were closest to Jesus. Something was happening in the temple that we don't really understand today. Devout people were changing currency at one table to buy animals at another table to then sacrifice inside. These were necessary actions to proceed into worship, and the conveniences made sense. But maybe the conveniences became the act of worship. Maybe the conveniences and the necessary steps became the *thing* people anticipated each week or once a month—getting everyone in the household dressed, hurrying out the door, making sure they had enough cash to buy a couple of turtledoves, rushing in, making the trade, handing the birds over to a priest, heading back home feeling a sense of relief and comfort.

The rituals were meant to remind them of their humanity and the image of God pressed on their soul, but maybe those well-intended rituals became chores and rushed obligations. And those increasingly convenient rituals also left some people out—the people who couldn't scrape enough cash together, the people who couldn't pull the right robes on. Jesus was pretty mindful in his ministry of who was left out, what was overlooked, and how people were missing out on the real life God designed for them.

In each gospel, we read about this scene. Jesus can't take it anymore and starts to release a holy rage among his peers and colleagues. *You got it wrong, friends. God is bigger than you think. God is not after sacrifices but wants your love. You are missing the point. God doesn't want an exclusive club that only the best get in, God wants a people who are honest and loving, filled with compassion and committed to discovering a holy life together.*

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, these words and actions are the end of Jesus' ministry; his arrest and death are close behind. But for John, Jesus is just getting started. "So when Jesus drives the animals out of the Temple, overturns the tables of the moneychangers, and demands the end of buying and selling," writes David Lose, "he is really announcing the end of this way of relating to God."

Some Christian clergy have wrongly used this text to demonstrate how Jesus supplanted Judaism. Rightly understood, this scene is one of many throughout scripture (and even beyond scripture) sending the same message to humankind: God is not like you think, God is so much more. You are not like you think, you are so much more.

Genesis tells us of the first people who lived in a world where every need was met. They walked with God in the cool of the day. They were, quite literally, made for each other. But they weren't sure they could trust it. Maybe God was holding out on them. Maybe there was a better way to know truth and experience life. And God turned the tables, sending them out to a different life.

When war and devastation sends Israel into Babylonian exile, people were sure that God was not with them or perhaps not real at all. Their questions and crisis of faith seemed more present than any God they'd known. Despite doubt and distant land, a word of comfort for God's people moves toward them. Isaiah whispers of God's gentleness. Jeremiah tells them to plant gardens and pray for the welfare of the place they have been sent. God sees and hears them. God is near to them in exile. God is with them.

Beyond scripture, our story of protestant church in the United States has been shifting for a while now. When I was a child, we were at church for at least 10 hours each week. My pastor preached three sermons—the 11:00 Sunday worship, 6:00 Sunday vespers, and Wednesday's mid-week prayer service. There was Sunday School, handbell choir, children, youth, and adult choirs, mission organizations, and committee meetings. Seasonally, we had Saturday morning visitation, Vacation Bible School, summer choir tours and mission camps. This was what you did. Church was busy. And as we've said here before, sometimes busy, even busy with all good things, keeps us from experiencing what is best.

Depending on city and context, that way of Church life is declining or is already no more. Activities and programs in most brick-and-mortar churches are already half of what they once were. We are changing in our understanding of what it means to be church together. Perhaps we are wise to ask of this shift, "What tables is Jesus turning now?"

It's easy to read a story of people we didn't know in a time we don't understand and cheer Jesus on. It's easy to judge the scene and wonder why would people ever believe they had to trade in Roman currency for temple currency to make an animal sacrifice for their family? But our own tradition in the past 20-50 years has many practices that deserved to have come to a more jarring end than they did. We filled our schedules with ways of doing church that reflected the way we did business or did government or any well-meaning civic organization. We became so busy at church, in fact, that there were fewer and fewer opportunities to simply be together as friends. To sense God's nearness. To help each other cultivate practices that allow us to slow down and discover how God might be present in our lives.

We're in the midst of a transition in the religious landscape around us that can be scary (particularly if you're paid full-time to do this work and are wondering what career will

look like 30 years from now). But I think this opportunity is also exciting and allows us to be creative in the very best of ways. We get to ask each other: Where is God? How do we sense God's presence? What tables is Jesus turning over because they no longer serve a purpose? By what methods and in what ways have we sought God that need now come to an end?

David Lose comments, "I think the unintended consequence of this salutary emphasis on Sunday worship and church in general is that we've unintentionally given the impression that church is this great big God-box where people should come to experience God. I mean, think about: almost all of our [outreach] efforts in recent memory have been geared toward getting people to come to church. (And the gauge of just how strong the impulse has been is your immediate and unconscious reaction...of initially wondering what else [outreach] efforts could possibly be about.)"

I mentioned I was sometimes part of a visitation program on Saturday mornings. Church members would get assignments of folks who had visited the church in recent weeks, and we would go to their homes at 9:00 on a Saturday morning to visit. We didn't bring bagels or cups of coffee, just asked if we could talk about church for a few minutes. And we somehow thought this would make them want to come back to church again. And we never thought it was intrusive or rude or unwelcome. The mindset was come here, come here, come here. We were not asking *how can we best support people in living the life God wants for them? What are people most craving in their lives? How can we best live out our faith together as a community?*

Whether we could articulate it or not, we believed we had some knowledge of God that could only be experienced in one way, in one place, at one time. We had good intentions but the wrong set of questions.

The Psalmist guides us to ask:

Psalm 139

Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit?
to be out of your sight?

If I climb to the sky, you're there!

If I go underground, you're there!

If I flew on morning's wings
to the far western horizon,

You'd find me in a minute—
you're already there waiting!

Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the dark!

At night I'm immersed in the light!"

It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you;

night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you.

Maybe the better way is to make empty space for us to sit in wonder asking, "Where can I go that God is not there?" As churches everywhere transition from a long season of big programs and big church staff and big worship performances gathered together in one location, maybe our response is to be people who do less yet live together more. Maybe God is ridding us of the ways of being that limit us and prevent us from this better way. We become clearer in our purpose to live our lives together in God-honoring ways. We gather to affirm God's presence in our lives and in our world. This happens in a large group for worship but also in small groups scattered in the places where life happens—dining room tables, coffee shops, a regular dinner group meeting at a favorite restaurant.

Maybe we gather in here and out there to study and pray and learn. We practice listening to each other and listening to our own lives. We challenge each other to slow down and live out the beliefs we profess. We learn to see God in each other and listen for God in our midst. Maybe we become people who lose track of time when we are together because we are doing the things we love, discovering who God dreams for us to be.

Maybe we become the church that John Ortberg describes: "a true 'just as I am' church...a community where everybody [can] bring all their baggage and brokenness with them without neat and tidy happy endings quite yet...a group where everyone [is] loved and no one pretend[s]." If that's what we are giving our lives to, then I'm in. Let's dream and imagine and move into better ways of being church. Let's do fewer good things in favor of one or two best things. Let's have more time around meal tables than we do around committee tables. Let's delight in each other as we discover where God can be found. Are you with me?