

Turning Over Tables

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

This compelling gospel sequence of Jesus' assault on the commercialized Temple precincts reminds us that just as with the Temple, the Church is meant to be a witness and advocate of God's love, justice and mercy. But, an ageless challenge of institutional religion is that it has a tendency to place adoration of the institution above the adoration and purposes of God. But we don't set out to do this on purpose. I think we try to do our best for God. But we forget time and time again that what we think is best or wise is not what *God* thinks is best or wise.

This is why the season of Lent is so important in the life of the Church. Jesus' true call is for us to be a people of compassion, healing, justice and mercy. Deeply engaged Lenten practices are meant to transform our thinking and actions in our world.

I believe all Lenten practices are well intentioned. But a good question we might ask ourselves is, "Is what we are doing for Lent going to align us with God's deepest hope for the human family? Or, "Is my Lenten practice helping to empower me to do the loving and risky things Jesus calls us to do?"

What if, for instance, a practice of Lenten self-denial is understood as an act of solidarity and compassion for those whose poverty or access to what we are voluntarily doing without is *not* voluntary? I think then we have entered into the presence of God. But if we give up a treat or "luxury item" because we think that that in itself will please God, then, no matter how well intentioned, we have just offered up an empty sacrifice.

Jesus tells us that we are children of God. And as so we are confronted by a God of wisdom, a God of power, and yes, a God of ethical demand. As Fred Craddock says, "It is before this God that we are meant to stand, not in front of a mirror."

Jesus tells us that this God before whom we stand loves us with an everlasting love---no matter what. We are taught time and again that this love should make us bold; this love should make us courageous. The love of God is what gives us the courage to forgive. The love of God is what makes us bold enough to turn over any tables that are a barrier between God and God's people. And what are the barriers that the prophets and Jesus are always exhorting us to tear down? They are the barriers society creates that make some winners and some losers; the barriers of poverty, gender, exclusion based on race, and shaming those who are mentally ill.

These are not modern inventions. Jesus constantly demanded that we love God by feeding the hungry, homeless, and poor. Read the story of Lazarus languishing, ignored at the rich man's gate, to hear what Jesus says. And going against his culture, he consistently placed women in leadership or restored or created a new place of acceptance in their lives.

He spoke to "disreputable women" in public places, he took the part of a woman when Simon the Pharisee attempted to shame her, he told men they were not allowed to divorce their wives on a whim, he touched women who were menstruating and pronounced them clean and whole. All unheard of in his society.

And in the face of deep bigotry against Samaritans, he tells a story of a courageous and compassionate man who shows God's love far better than a priest or holy man from the Temple—and that courageous man was a Samaritan.

And he cast out the demons of mental illness time and time again. He brought them out of the caves, graveyards, and places of confinement and told them to be free and whole; he brought them into the light of day as God's beloved.

And he turns over the tables in the Temple because he can no longer tolerate the commodification of God, and the use of money to exclude the marginalized and to shame those whom God commands us to love.

It is the light of God's love, which shined so brightly in Jesus, which allows us to see where we might need to turn over tables and resolve to create mercy and greater access to God's table. Let's let this Lent be about tearing down any barriers we may have erected---let's open wide the way of mercy that leads straight to Christ's sumptuous and Abundant Life.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+