

Clearing the Tables – based on John 2:13-22
Aspen Community UMC
March 15, 2009

Page 1 of 5

Lent is a time to think about how we live our lives – in a way that calls us to task.
Lent is a journey – an inward journey and an outward journey - which was the theme of last week.

I want to stay with that idea a little this morning.

Sometimes things are just not as neat and orderly as we plan them -
and our lives are certainly like that.

And there is some destruction that happens – by the earth itself.

Earthquakes would be an example of that.

And our stories of old even have God destroying life- as it was known - in the flood story.

Flood stories occur in a number of early accounts – not just the Judeo Christian story.

And there is some destruction that we bring about.

Some is just destruction - and does not contribute to overall good.

Some destruction is in service to wholeness – health – restoration of something bigger.

So we do destroy – or destruction happens – and it is not necessarily a bad thing.
We must dig up and turn over gardens in order to be ready for the next growing season.

This incident at the temple and the tables being overturned – by none other than Jesus
presents us a little different way to think of him.

Too often we think of Jesus as too mild – too harmless.

So, the theme is that of “clearing the tables” - mostly in a metaphorical way.

It is something that needs to happen from time to time.



Sometimes we have to rebuild even our concept of God.

Anyone remember a comedy skit with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks?

Reiner asks Brooks, “Did you always believe in God?”

Brooks replied: “No. We had a guy in our village named Phil, and for a time we worshipped him.”

Reiner said, “You worshiped a guy named Phil? Why?”

“Because he was big, and mean, and he could break you in two with his bare hands!”

Reiner ask, “Did you have prayers?”

“Yes, would you like to hear one?”

Dear Phil, please don't be mean and hurt us, or break us in two with your bare hands.”

Reiner said, “So when did you start worshipping God?”

“Well, one day a big thunderstorm came up, and a lightening bolt hit Phil.
We gathered around and saw that he was dead.
Then we said to one another. “There’s definitely something bigger than Phil.”



Sometimes we let go of one belief – way of doing something – one understanding of how things are -
because we see it no longer works – or it gets corrupted.

We all want to believe that there is something bigger than us,
or something bigger than our perspective on life.
The Unitarian minister, Forrest Church says, “God is not God’s name;
God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.”

God is the name we use for our sense of something greater.
We humans have created lots of stories around our belief in something greater.
There is the Old Testament – and the New Testament for us Jews and Christians.
But we don’t want to become deluded and think -
that because we can name something that we understand it.
So we are always on a journey to understanding.
And we go back to the stories – looking for the kernels of truth that surely exist in the stories.



This was a story of Jesus.
And it probably happened about like it was written because the same story appeared in all the gospels.
The story had some different features – but the basic event is there.
Something like this would catch the ears of the media – would it not?

It is sensational.

We can’t know what really happened – the nuances of it – one table overturned or all of them.
We just know that Jesus was distressed - incensed when he saw the place that was so sacred to him -
and a place of worship – being used for so much commercial benefit.

There were reasons for the changing of money.
People had traveled many miles

and they had to have particular coins for purchasing their sacrifices.
To be able to change one kind of currency for the one they needed – was a convenience.
Since it was important to bring animals for sacrifice – it was convenient to purchase them right there.
So, it was expedient.

But that is not the point. Do you know the point?

The point was the system.

The system was put in place to maintain the interests of the
priests and the upper classes who benefited from the buying and selling of merchandise.

It had little to do with the worship of God.

Jesus knew this – and he acted on it – in a way that caught some attention.

Sometimes that needs to happen.

Sometimes we need to clear out one thing - even if just to make room for another.



Anybody see *Wall-E*?

The animated movie from Pixar – someone called it an “ecological parable.”

It’s a computer-generated cartoon. It’s a vision of our potential extinction.

It’s also a sweet and simple love story and sci-fi adventure.

It opens to an intricately rendered city with skyscrapers.

There are no inhabitants apart from a battered - industrious robot and his loyal cockroach sidekick.

There is a hazy, dust-filtered sunlight illuminating a silent landscape.

This is a world without people – though it teems with evidence of past life.

It is a kind of clearing from earth’s table all of humanity.

Wall-E is a dented little workhorse of a robot.

He gathers and compacts garbage.

His name is an acronym for Waste Allocation Load Lifter – Earth Class.

In the rusty metal hulk where he and the cockroach take shelter from dust storms,

he keeps a carefully sorted collection of treasures,

including Zippo lighters, nuts and bolts, and a Rubik’s cube.

He seems to have a tender regard for the artifacts of this lost civilization.

The humans have been driven off the planet.
driven into space because of the manufacture and consumption of more and more stuff.

As we look around on the landscape on which *Wall-E* works –
we see that in some bygone time – the earth was filled with megastores - and tons of garbage.

When there was too much stuff - the leading corporate conglomerate
sent its valued customers to a space station.

During their time on the space station they evolve into fat,
lazy leisure addicts waited on by machines.

But, my point in sharing some images of the movie was about how
Wall-E and – a space station research probe named Eve - discover one lone little living plant.

That little plant may be the hope of restoring life to the planet.
That becomes the hope - that the now grossly misshapen humans can return to Earth and rebuild -
in a way that does not overcome the planet with stuff - that sucks the life out of it.²
The tables got cleared (to use the analogy) and in time new growth appeared.



Jesus saw the temple practices as sucking the life out of the religion he knew
and the relationship with God that so filled him.

Sometimes the practices of organized religion need to get called into question.

Luther certainly did it.

Our founder John Wesley found a staleness to worship in England at the time he lived.

The teachers like those we listen to and dialogue with
in our weekly Lenten series *Living the Questions* – call into question
ideas and beliefs that no longer serve the purpose for which they were formulated
in our Christian practice.

This is all to say that clearing the tables is a pretty good thing.

And I am glad the story has come to us that Jesus
even created a scene that made people think – even back then.

As I studied this material I began to wonder what is still on the table
of religious thinking that needs to be cleared?

One thing would be any religious group thinking they have all the answers.
Another would be to use religion as a way to discriminate against individuals or groups
rather than to look at the common good – and the inherent value of each person.

And like the comic routine about worshipping a guy named Phil,
the opportunity is always there for learning.

And like Wall-E – doing the best he can to clean up the mess and at the same time -
trying to recognize what may have been useful – important – something we want to keep.

We rejoice when we see new life and new potential.

For that is the nature of things.

So, think about your own tables – what is lying there taking up room?

It might be real tables and real stuff in our lives.

It might be symbolic.

Or it might be memories and hurts from the past that we can now take off the table of our hearts.

What is lying there taking up room in your heart – that needs to be let go of?

Jesus overturned tables in the temple – because they obscured what was more important -
and corrupted the real purpose of the temple.

It is a different picture of Jesus than we usually see – but an important one.

It is a model for us to think about and apply to our lives.

We are always growing – always learning -

hopefully always becoming more aware of the spirit in our lives -

more aware of the claim of God upon our lives -

more aware of the Spirit enriching everything we do.

Clearing the tables is a nice image.

It can help us make space for those things to happen.

¹ Adapted from Ian Lawton

² Adapted from a review by A. O. Scott *entitled In a World Left Silent, One Heart Beeps*, June 27, 2008