

## Third Sunday in Lent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In my imagination I picture the scene from our Gospel reading today: the crowds of Jewish people coming from all over to make their sacrifices in the Temple, the mooing and cooing and baaing animals – unblemished of course – that will be sacrificed, the money-changers waiting to convert foreign currency to the acceptable coinage for the Temple Tax. Everything going according to plan, the way it was every year.

And then Jesus shows up. Chaos ensues! Animals are driven out, coins poured on the ground, tables are flipped over as Jesus yells, “Take these things out of here, stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

And in my imagination, the people are angry, but also upset and confused. Nobody has done anything wrong. The Jewish Law, as written in Leviticus 5, specifies all the offerings that someone must bring to atone for their sins, including animals like doves, sheep, and cows. The animal sellers are needed to provide the sacrifice for those who don’t own animals themselves. And Exodus 30 outlines the Temple Tax – a half-shekel to be paid by all households. So really, all the sellers and money changers are just facilitating worship – in fact, they’re essential to it. But now, worship is disrupted, sacrifices are halted, all because one man doesn’t like what’s going on. What’s happening here?

Here is Jesus in his first public act in the book of John. He’s called disciples, he’s turned water into wine, but here he is on the main stage, giving a message that will set up his next three years of ministry. Those present may not fully grasp what’s happening, but we have the benefit of an omniscient narrator: as it says earlier in John 1, “What has come into being through him was life.” Jesus has come that we might have life and have it abundantly. As he says here, they will destroy the temple of his body but he will raise it up in three days. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have been given the free gift of abundant life.

Here lies the conflict. There are forces opposed to this free gift. First and foremost – the marketplace, the place where goods are bought and sold and exchanged. It seems harmless, but in fact the marketplace is diametrically opposed to Jesus’ mission. The marketplace is based entirely on the assumption of scarcity. There’s never enough to go around. You have to give something up to get something. You have to work to get what you want. There’s no such thing as a free lunch.

This marketplace, while serving a purpose for the people who have come to worship, is getting in the way of God’s free gift of abundant life. And so it must go!

“Get your marketplace out of this ‘Temple’” Jesus cries – “God dwells here,” as he knocks over the tables that are crushing the life out of worshippers.

It would be nice to say that we learned our lesson, that this one event taught everyone who loved God to focus on Her abundance, not the world’s scarcity. But it seems like the marketplace consumes us even more now, concealing God’s gifts from some and stealing them from others. Market forces span the globe and make us feel powerless.

About two years ago, I was deeply wrestling with this conflict. I had begun to see the money changing tables set up in the temple of my body: media and advertisements and the gender binary all coming together, shaming me into buying what I didn’t need and keeping me away from what I did need: reassurance that I was made in the image of my Creator, that I was loved, that I was enough.

I was given that reassurance in the free waters of my baptism, but of course the market forces want to interrupt that. People who know that they’re enough don’t feel compelled to anxiously and compulsively buy expensive name brand clothing, Nair, performance-enhancing steroids, Spanx, hair relaxers, diet systems, plastic surgery, self-tanners, home gyms, skin lighteners, or hair plugs, or any of the millions of products that we’re told will make us happy. They tell us that we’re not enough so they can convince us they’ve got the solution to all of the shame and unhappiness that they’ve created. People allowed to feel comfortable in their own skin aren’t reliable consumers.

But I don’t need more products to help me attain the forever unattainable. I need to look in the mirror and see God’s goodness flowing through me. And I’m not the only one. I also started to hear more from trans and gender-non-conforming voices. While I was crushed by this table, I was also sitting at it. By following all the rules of being a “real woman”, I inadvertently helped to enforce them myself.

So I flipped a table. I stopped shaving my legs. At first it seemed weird and gross, like I wasn't allowed to just let my body be itself. I had to remember God's promises to me, and to hear each week the way Jesus upends any powers or principalities that keep me away from those promises. Even on days I don't quite believe it, I can let my hairy legs speak for me, as they echo Jesus's bold cry to the systems that try to keep us away from God's abundant life: "Get your marketplace out of my body, God dwells here!"

This isn't the only table that Jesus flips, oh no. Our Lutheran faith is based on upending tables. Martin Luther saw the marketplace try to regulate God's free gift of grace, how the indulgence sellers tried to make scarce what God has made abundant. He flipped a table too, and those 95 Theses nailed to the church door are still echoing Jesus' bold cry to the anyone who wants us to pay for God's love, "Get your marketplace out of our hearts, God dwells here!"

I saw a flipped table last year when I visited Nachusa Grasslands – a restored prairie in Western Illinois that is now home to native species and even a herd of bison. It's an amazing ecosystem filled with an abundance of God's creatures. Our tour guide told us about a man who came once to ask if they would sell this land to create gravel pits. He saw the bottom line, but the stewards of the land saw the promised Green of Eden, where Creation could be our relatives and not just resources. And those waving prairie grasses above the lucrative gravel supply echoed Jesus' bold cry to all who would plunder God's good earth, "Get your marketplace out of Creation, God dwells here!"

I look around me and I see a table-flipping people – a people who share the Good News of God's abundant life. Through your radical welcome to immigrants, your work with the Night ministry, your generosity in advent and Lenten projects. Last week I saw a people excited about their mission of hospitality in this neighborhood and equally committed to the care of creation, and in one unanimous vote for solar panels and air conditioning, put their trust in God's abundance. I see a people called to cast out the oppressive marketplace wherever it manifests itself. A people empowered to take unpopular stands against powerful lobbies and monied interests. A people working to flip the tables that they are crushed by as well as the ones they are sitting at.

A people who follow Jesus as he flips table after table after table, clearing the systems of scarcity out of God's world of plenty until the only table left is the one we gather around each week, the one that fills us with life – abundant. Free. Everlasting. Thanks be to God.