“***Overturning the Tables***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Mar. 7, 2020

**Zechariah 14:20–21**

20 On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, “Holy to the Lord.” And the cooking-pots in the house of the Lord shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar; 21and every cooking-pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

**John 2:13–22**

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. 15Making 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. 16He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” 17His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” 18The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” 19Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” 20The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” 21But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Jesus’ table-overturning action must have been shocking to people, but it is important to notice that the text does not say that he struck any person. He used the whip to drive out the sheep and cattle. The people fled from sheer terror, probably. People got out of his way because of his sheer energy. There is a certain forcefulness when a gentleman finally gets angry. Jesus wanted the temple to be used for worshiping and thinking about the Father in heaven, not for commerce.

The international aspect of Jesus’ action does not appear here in John, but in Mark’s version of this event, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Mark 11:17). Mark is right to preserve Jesus’ concern for openness to “all peoples.” Instead, John focuses on a prophetic aspect to Jesus’ words. John often shows people, long after the events, making a connection between Jesus’ actions and the Scriptures. Here, people think of Ps 69:9, which speaks of zeal (enthusiasm) for God’s house.

The people ask him to give them a sign to validate what he is doing. What are people wanting when they demand a sign? They repeatedly asked this of Jesus, and people still ask it today. They are seeking a revelation from God either through words or through the objects of nature. It is a request for magic, and for a short-cut: a message from God that doesn’t take any moral struggle or mental effort on their part.

Jesus gives an answer that stimulates thought: a prophet’s answer. He forces reflection, puzzlement, mental effort. Only later do they understand his enigmatic remark about rebuilding a temple in three days. So he *did*, after all, give them a sign, in the form of a verbal puzzle that only made sense after he had risen from the dead.

Jesus is not opposed to giving the kind of sign that requires some mental effort. Jesus’ life is a schoolbook in spirituality for all of us. He draws attention to his resurrection not in order to claim bragging rights, but because he knows that his resurrection is *instructional* and inspirational for us. Through his resurrection, we learn that death has lost its sting, that death is just a gateway to the next life.

What are we asking for when we ask for a sign? We want a quick answer. We don’t want to have to read and study and think long and hard. We’re asking for God’s message on a silver platter, so that we don’t have to do any mental work. We want answers made easy.

Am I being *mean* here? Or is it time that we *all* stop asking for magical signs, and learn to read the *moral* signs, the *rational* signs, that are right in front of us? When we want to improve our lives, but resist making changes, we are ignoring our own better thinking. What kind of sign could really help us, if we don’t follow what we already know? It’s not signs that have gotten you this far, anyway. It’s faith and reason.

Jesus’ answer to the question, “what sign can you show us?” could be paraphrased as “a sign that only makes sense when you reflect on my life, death, and resurrection on the third day.” If you ask for a sign from Jesus, you must pay attention to God’s activity in his life and resurrection. Jesus asks this, not because he needs us to bow down to him, but because there is so much about God that we *cannot learn* except through him.

What about his assault on the money-changers? This is a radical prophetic attack on the materialistic temple indus­try. This event probably occurred near the end of his career, as Mark, Matthew, and Luke show, and not at the beginning, as John places it.

What is its meaning? I think it’s well communicated in Zechariah (14:20–21) who says *everything* will be holy, even the little bells on the horses will be holy; every common cooking pot in Judah will be holy. This is not a priestly idea. Priestly thinking requires that *some* things be holy, and some things *not*. Priestly thinking requires a sharp separation of holy from unholy, thus creating a hierarchy, and affirming a special class of those who are qualified to handle holy things. To say that *everything* will be holy is to value ordinary life and to undercut priestly thinking altogether. If all pots and all bells are equally holy, then all *people* have equal access to the divine, too. That means there is no upper class in the realm of holiness, no sacred experts, no wizards or magicians of the holy.

Zechariah finishes his book by saying “there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord.” The radical Zechariah is envisioning a new world, one without priestly hierarchies, without sacred discrimination, without purity barriers. This is a prophetic, not a priestly, vision, and Jesus seems to be affirming this view. Jesus cares nothing for ritual holiness, but he is concerned by the lack of *spiritual* holiness: holy hearts and attitudes. He is reacting against temple ideology that was simultaneously hierarchical and materialistic, indulging priestly greed.

The apostles think back on this incident after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and they realize the temple that was rebuilt was the temple of his body. There is a similar occurrence in John where Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, and only after his death do people remember the prophecy—also from Zechariah (9:9)—that your king is peaceful, he is humble, and he comes to you riding on a donkey (John 12:14–16).

Twice does John bring out this experience of the disciples reflecting upon Jesus’ actions and later coming to understand what they meant. There were signs in what Jesus did, but they were not magic signs, they were *instructive* ones. They showed that the true king is a peace-king. They affirmed that holiness can penetrate all of life, rather than creating a class of supposedly holy people, or holy objects. Do we understand this point of Jesus? Do we think the Bible is holy, or are the things that are *said* in it, holy? Is it the symbol or the *reality* that matters? Is it the vehicle or what’s *in* the vehicle that matters?

The temple was just a symbol, and what was done there was not living up to the deeper meanings that the symbol was meant to convey. Jesus rebukes the temple as it is because it is failing its mission, due to priestly exclusiveness and materialism. The temple should be open to all peoples, and its purpose should not be commercial. Believers should be about more spiritual and ethical activities, instead of sleepwalking in familiar and self-serving ways. The cleansing of the temple shocked people out of their sleepwalking. He provoked them to *think*. And he provokes to think, today.