

Story and Meditation: Turning Tables

March 7, 2021

Psalm 19

John 2:13-22

by *Eric Anderson*

They needed protection, or so said the protectors.

There was a particularly rich bed of seaweeds along the reef that the honu just loved. Lots of the big green sea turtles would swim over and down to feed and indeed to feast. It was big enough and replenished itself enough that it never seemed to run short. It seemed safe enough, but perhaps that was because of the protectors.

Who were the protectors? Well, they were some of the biggest honu, and they spaced themselves out around the seaweed bed and kept watch for predators, particularly the niuhi, or tiger shark. If one of them sounded the alarm, they could gather enough honu to prompt the niuhi to go somewhere else. It didn't happen often, to be honest, but it seemed like a good system.

The problem was that the protectors demanded payment. Each turtle that arrived had to provide one of the protector honu with some seaweed to eat. It sort of seemed fair, given that they stayed at the outside edge of the seaweed bed, but still...

To one young honu it just seemed wrong. For one thing, plucking seaweed from outside the seaweed bed didn't make any sense. If they were going to help feed the protector honu, then why didn't they pick seaweed from inside the bed rather than outside? For that matter, why did the protectors need feeding in the first place? There were plenty of them. They could have swapped off to eat. They could have traded places with honu that weren't part of the protector group. They could have pulled their circle back just a little bit and browsed and watched at the same time.

Instead, they demanded that each arriving honu bring them a seaweed stalk, like a ticket to a movie theater, before they could come in.

The young honu tried to point this out to the protectors. They didn't listen. She tried arguing with one or two of them. They didn't listen. She tried crossing the circle without a seaweed stalk. They chased her away.

One day she turned up at the feeding ground with lots of other young honu. *A lot* of young honu, many more than the protectors. Not a single one of them carried any seaweed.

"You can't come in," said one of the protectors.

“Yes, we can,” said the young honu. “And we will.”

“You’re supposed to bring food,” said the protector.

“We’re not bringing it ever again,” said the young honu. “And you will not stop this many of us.”

And no, they couldn’t. Things were more fair after that. Protectors were no longer just the biggest, and they traded off to graze for themselves. Smaller turtles no longer hunted in barren ground for seaweed stalks to feed others. They lived with less bullying on the reef.

All because one honu decided that enough was enough. All because plenty of other honu swam with her.

The merchants that Jesus confronted in the Jerusalem Temple had a role in Temple life and practice. The ancient law required that animal sacrifices be made with uninjured beasts. When you’d traveled for 75 miles (that’s the distance from Capernaum in Galilee to Jerusalem) on foot, your sheep or cattle would probably develop cuts and sores. The best place to get your sacrificial animal was right there in Jerusalem.

Likewise you probably needed to exchange your money. Jews of the first century used the coins issued by the Roman Empire for the most part. Many of these coins could not be used to pay the Temple tax of the ancient law. They had faces on them, and that was interpreted to violate the commandment against graven images, at least for this purpose. Most pilgrims probably had to trade their coins for something that would be acceptable.

Jesus no doubt saw the necessity. Jesus also objected. Forcefully.

Karoline Lewis writes at *Working Preacher*, “Jesus’ command to the dove sellers differs strikingly from the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). Instead of a concern for temple malpractices (“den of robbers”), Jesus orders that his Father’s house not be made a marketplace. For the temple system to survive, however, the ordered transactions of a marketplace were essential. The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures. Jesus is not quibbling about maleficence or mismanagement but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system. Underneath this critique lies also the intimation that the temple itself is not necessary.”

By the time John’s Gospel was written, Christians and Jews had both learned to live without the Temple. It burned during the rebellion against Rome in 70, about forty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and it was not rebuilt.

To be sure, this market was not in the Temple building itself. It was probably in a wide court surrounding the temple at the center. I have no doubt that its sounds, sights, and smells were present everywhere in the Temple complex.

Jesus objected. Forcefully.

Cameron B. R. Howard reflects on this and on our current situation at Working Preacher: “In these days when many of us are unable to congregate in our traditional sacred spaces, and when remote work has further blurred the lines between our 9 to 5 and our 5 to 9, it may feel especially difficult to find places and times that are set apart for holiness. We can do our shopping and our worshipping, our working and our movie-watching, all in the same room—on the same screen! But sabbath rest is not something else that we have to produce. Sabbath rest is a gift to us. Holiness is the resting state of God. We are called simply to be with God and not with the marketplace.”

In these days of fervid busy-ness, with rest being frequently sacrificed to some notion of producing something, with the need to find sacred space in the same space as living space which is also the same space as working space, simply being with God, simply setting aside the work of the day, simply coming to the center of holiness, is turning the tables in the Temple.

Maren Tirabassi shared a great insight this week, and I am still thinking about it. In her blog, Gifts in Open Hands, she writes,

“For John, it wasn’t the last straw –
it was the inauguration,
‘God’s house is not a marketplace!’

Though the fact the other gospel writers
mention it near the end
probably means –
he did it every time he saw
a holy space become a robber’s den.

Mark remembered that Jesus said,
‘God’s house shall be called
a house of prayer for all nations.’

For what nation
have you prayed today?

And, if you are or will be soon
in-person at worship,
are your church tables right-way-up

and holding grace for all?”

For thousands of years people of these ancient faiths have engaged in a contest with the marketplace. It has been an uneven contest, and the marketplace has generally won. Rev. Tirabassi has placed her finger on it. “Are your church tables right-way-up – and holding grace for all?”

We can and should ask that question in every sphere of our lives. Have we created systems that keep some away from what they need in order to satisfy the desires of others? Well, yes. I’m sure the honu story sounded awfully familiar. Do we say that some are worthy of having their needs met while others are not? Well, yes. That’s precisely the “debate” over the minimum wage, isn’t it, an argument that some should be paid less than will support them, and that somehow that’s OK? Do we set an entry fee for grace? Well... that is the question we need to always ask ourselves in the church, isn’t it?

We will shortly come to the table of Christ, the table of grace, the table to which all are invited to fill themselves and be satisfied. This table, which is your tables: let it be a free table, an open table, a fulfilling table. Let us turn the tables to the sharing of God’s grace.

Amen.