

Turning the Tables
Rev. James Van Schaick
Pound Ridge Community Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent
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John 2:13-22

I saw a clever quip about prayer in public schools. Public school prayer was banned by a still-controversial 1962 US Supreme Court decision, but the debate continues. One writer said that prayer could really never be banned in schools – not as long as thousands of students a day are sitting at their desks, saying quietly, “Lord, if you help me pass this test, I’ll stop being so mean to my sister.”

I think he was probably right. Bargaining with God is something that starts at a very early age. In fact, bargaining starts out at a very early age. As we start out in life, most of our engagement with the world could be described as “transactional.” We scream, and mommy feeds us, or changes our diapers. Later on, we learn that mommy gives us what we need when we “ask nicely,” but the concept is the same. We do what we’re supposed to do, and mommy or daddy does what they are supposed to do.

Our concept of a relationship with God starts out the same way. Before we can begin to understand the meaning of things like grace and forgiveness, the basic idea is that we’re good, and Jesus loves us. We do what we’re supposed to do, and Jesus does what he’s supposed to do.

I wonder if we ever completely outgrow our tendency to look at our relationship with God as a series of transactions. I think it’s just that as we grow older the stakes get higher. I know I am not immune to the urge to bargain with God. I particularly remember one deal I tried to make with God. About 30 years ago I ruptured my Achilles tendon when I was living in Manhattan, and had to spend a total of six weeks with my leg in a cast, completely dependent on crutches for mobility. One day as I was crutching back to my apartment from the grocery store, thinking about how nice it would be to walk without crutches, I actually prayed this prayer: “Lord, if I could just walk around the block, I would never be ungrateful about anything, ever again.” Of course, I eventually could walk around the block again. And as for never being ungrateful again, I was as good as my word – for about the first hour after my cast came off.

Trying to bargain with God is so natural for us that usually we don’t even know when we’re doing it. For example, we might pray for the strength to love our enemies. But if we were really good at understanding what is in our own hearts, we might realize that often we are really proposing a deal. We’ll try to love them, if God can just make it easier. The fact is that it’s hard for anyone to pray, “Lord,

help me forgive” without also praying, even just a little, that God will help the people we’re forgiving see the error of their ways.

Involvement in church can also be a kind of bargaining with God. Lutheran minister Michael Foss tells of how, over the years, he has many times approached people who had been worshipping with his congregation to ask them to join it. Often, he says, someone will ask him, “What do I get as a member that I don’t get now?”ⁱ That sounds sort of funny, but life in modern America trains us to be savvy consumers, and I wonder if it is reasonable to expect that we leave all that at the door when we come to church. Don’t we come in here every week with our tanks on “empty,” and in exchange for sitting quietly for an hour, hope we get topped up with some energy and inspiration? We put our money in the plate, and hopefully, we find the shelves stocked with the right spiritual commodities to fill up some of the holes in our lives until next time. We give what we give, and take what we get, and as long as it feels like a good bargain, we keep coming back.

This may sound to some like a fairly cynical way to look at things. But the fact is that it describes a very human tendency, we are always conscious of it or not. We humans are economic animals. That means that we intuitively weight the cost against the benefit for every action we contemplate, and proceed accordingly. And that tendency is why we can reduce even our faith to some sort of cost/benefit equation if we’re not careful.

There’s a sort of “religious consumerism” going on in today’s gospel lesson from John. Today, we experience a very different side of Jesus, to say the least. Jesus and his disciples have journeyed to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. When they arrive at the temple, they find it full of merchants and moneychangers. Jesus becomes so incensed that he drives them out of the temple, using a knotted cord as a whip. He overturns their tables, and sends their money and their sacrificial doves flying.

To understand what Jesus was reacting to, we need to know a little about what these people were doing. They were trying to make a buck, but they were also providing a legitimate service for the temple worshippers. The Hebrew system of worship was based on sacrifice. The Torah was full of instructions on what sacrifices were appropriate and in which circumstances. The laws always specified that whatever was to be sacrificed to the Lord was to be “without defect.” The animals had to be first quality.

The law also specified that sacrifices had to be made in one place, and one place only: the temple in Jerusalem. So, many Hebrews had to travel great distances to get there, and carrying all the animals for sacrifice would often be difficult. Travelers also faced the possibility of carrying an animal a long way only to find out when they got to the temple that the animal wasn’t good enough for sacrifice. The merchants in the temple just made it possible for them to buy what they needed right there. The moneychangers served an important function, too.

People traveling to Jerusalem from distant lands needed to convert currency, just like we do today.

So, what made Jesus so violently angry that he went after them with a knotted rope? We often hear that Jesus' anger was because they were overcharging. Maybe they did charge premium prices, or take a little too much commission on currency transactions. But was throwing them out the solution to that? Scripture is full of stories of other sinners who changed their ways when they heard Jesus' message. What exactly is Jesus attacking in the temple?

This story is popularly known as the "cleansing of the temple." In fact, that's the title you pew Bibles give it. But I'm not sure that goes far enough. There is something much more important going on.

The temple, and the sacrificial system of worship, depended on there being animals to sacrifice. It could not exist without them. So, in clearing out the merchants and moneychangers – the people who provided the animals for sacrifice – Jesus was doing far more than cleansing the temple. He was ending the temple. Or, more to the point, he was announcing the end of worship based on a buy-and-sell mentality.

And in stopping the buying and selling going on between the merchants and the people, Jesus was stopping something else. Jesus was ending the buying and selling that was going on between the worshippers and God. What Jesus was railing against was transactional, consumerist worship – one based not on true devotion to God, but on making a deal with God. For the price of a dove, God comes across with the blessings. For a lamb, whatever you've done wrong is forgotten. Jesus was bringing about the end of religion-as-commercial-transaction.

And Jesus had spent his entire ministry teaching us what kind of relationship was going to replace it. It was one based on love, and trust. The new relationship that Jesus wanted instead is summed up in a story you all know. It's the one about how Jesus asks a young man to tell him the "Greatest Commandment." As it is told in the gospel of Mark, the young man responds, "To love him [God] with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when he says that, Jesus answers, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:33-34)

The great King David had the right idea, too. Consumed by guilt over his affair with Bathsheba, David wrote this psalm to the Lord: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51:16-17)

The whole point of the “cleansing of the temple” was that God doesn’t call us into a transaction, but into a totally different reality. And the reason why our relationship with God could never be a business transaction is very simple. It’s because we have nothing to offer God in the deal that isn’t God’s already. But God’s vision for creation isn’t based on a business model. It’s based on a little intangible called grace. And grace defies valuation – or should I say, grace transcends valuation.

Here’s how the whole thing works. We come to God with a humble and contrite heart. We surrender everything to God – our minds, our hearts, our relationships, our stuff. We put our lives at God’s disposal. And then, an extraordinary thing happens. God gives them back to us, transformed – richer and more abundant than anything we could ever possibly have imagined for ourselves.

Of course, giving everything to God isn’t easy. But you know, all in all, it’s a bargain.

ⁱ Michael Foss, *Power Surge* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000) 20.