

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, March 16, 2008  
Rev. John Tapscott

“OVERTURING THE TABLES”

Matthew 21:12,13

Most of us have no direct experience with donkeys. That’s not quite true, for we’ve all had experience with human donkeys. But I’m speaking now of animals. Oh, we may have seen them in fields or in zoos or a nativity scene. But we’ve probably never had an up close experience of donkeys. Now we do know that donkeys are stubborn. One church used a live donkey for a Palm Sunday service. A person playing Jesus rode a donkey up the carpeted aisle as children waved palm branches, shouting, “Hosanna!” But when the donkey reached the edge of the hardwood floor at the front of the church, it just stopped, knowing that its’ hoofs would have no traction on the hardwood. It sensed that its legs would splay outward resulting in a great fall for both donkey and rider. No matter how hard people pulled, prodded and pushed, the donkey refused to step on to the hardwood floor, finally lying down on the carpet. Donkeys may be stubborn, but they are not stupid. Unfortunately in many human donkeys, you find both traits. Of course, there is no one like that among us!

On Palm Sunday, according to Matthew 21 Jesus arranged to ride as king into Jerusalem on a donkey. Matthew says, “This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion. Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.” The disciples went...and brought the donkey and the colt, and put their garments on them and he sat thereon.” Now there probably were two donkeys there, because an unbroken colt accompanied its’ mother wherever she went. And Jesus probably rode with both legs over the side of the donkey, which was the usual way. In the Middle East the donkey was and still is a viable alternative to walking. However, one cannot ride a donkey with dignity. It lacks the noble shape and stature of a horse. Furthermore, the donkey’s way of walking is an uneven clippity clop that constantly jiggles the rider up and down.

But don’t miss the symbolism here. Jesus chose to come bouncing into Jerusalem on a donkey. When a king came to wage war, he came on a white horse. But when he came to make peace, he rode a donkey. Jesus was making a strong statement about the nature of his Kingship. “Behold your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey.” And this word “humble” also means “gentle.”

Jesus may have come gently and humbly, but his arrival did not go unnoticed. Crowds

spread garments and branches on the road and shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” And when he entered Jerusalem the whole city was in turmoil saying, “Who is this?” Now this word “turmoil” comes from the Greek word “seio”, from which we get our English word “seismic”. When Jesus came into Jerusalem, the city was shaken up, like it had been hit by an earthquake tremor. The crowd expected Jesus to do something big. And they were right. Here’s the first thing he did. “Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers.” (Matthew 21:13) Ironic isn’t it? The humble, gentle King came into Jerusalem to shake up the accepted order and overturn the tables of power. In fact, this was what Jesus’ ministry was all about and it was most clearly seen in this last week in Jerusalem. He overturned the tables. I want us to think about tables Jesus overturned for our sake and the tables he may be overturning in our midst today.

*First, Jesus overturned the tables of unrighteousness.*

Jesus overturned the tables and said to the sellers and money-changers. “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.” Now it was well-known that some sharp practices were going on in the temple. Pilgrims were charged an inflated rate as they exchanged common currency for the special coin needed to pay the temple tax. Similarly, pilgrims were forced to buy an animal for sacrifice inside the temple rather than bring one in from the outside. And of course, those sold inside were of a much higher price. It’s like going to a sports stadium where you’re not allowed to bring in your own food and drinks, but must buy them at inflated prices inside. It was worse really, for you can choose not to eat in the stadium, but people had to make a sacrifice inside the temple. And recently discovered ancient records indicate that it was the high priest Caiaphas who masterminded this monopoly, taking advantage of the pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for their spiritual observance, and driving into bankruptcy the small businessmen who sold animals for sacrifice. It’s the same old world, isn’t it? And those who were doing these things claimed immunity from wrong-doing because it was taking place in God’s house. “We’re safe! We’re doing God’s work!” they said. God’s house had become a refuge for robbers, rather than a place of worship and prayer.

So Jesus overturned the tables of unrighteousness. Jesus wouldn’t stand for such exploitation. Jesus was on the side of the common people, and though he spent time with the upper crust, he spent even more time with the common folk, and the marginalised and the exploited. Jesus always had lots of support among the common people, which is why the authorities had to arrest and try him by night. The folk who welcomed him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday were *not* the same people who cried out in Pilate’s court for his death on Good Friday. Furthermore, Jesus wouldn’t stand for people doing these things in the name of God

and claiming the protection of the temple. Now the whole system was back in place the day after he overturned the tables. But through his action Jesus started the process of overturning it once and for all. And by 70 A. D. when the Temple was destroyed, it was gone once and for all.

“I the Lord, hate robbery and wrong doing”, says the Scripture. And Christ still overturns the tables of unrighteousness and wrong-doing. When he returns again in glory all the crooked things will be made straight at last. But until then he is overturning tables, indeed shaking the world up, through the people whom he has called and raised up - the church - who stand against exploitation and wrong-doing in all its forms. We are people who reflect God’s passion for doing what is right and just not according to how the world defines these things, but according to how God’s word defines them. In all we do we seek to be people of the highest integrity, in our personal and corporate relationships. Of course, we get it wrong sometimes, and need God’s mercy and forgiveness. We need to be set again on the paths of righteousness. But at our best, this is who we are and what we stand for. Taking advantage of others or exploiting them is way out of bounds for Christians. We stand with and for those who are being exploited or treated unfairly. We are doing the work of Christ himself as we help to overturn the tables named wrong-doing and injustice.

*Jesus also overturned the tables of sacrifice.*

By overturning the tables, Jesus began overturning the whole animal sacrificial system by which one was cleansed and forgiven. From the time Adam and Eve fell, people have sensed their separation from God. They’ve felt a need to do something, to make some sacrifice, in order to make themselves acceptable to the deity. God gave Israel very specific rules on how to do it, so that they wouldn’t fall into some of the bizarre practices of the pagan nations, who mutilated themselves physically or even sacrificed their children, something God specifically told Israel not to do.

But the sacrificial system God gave to Israel was a foreshadowing of the final sacrifice God himself would provide. You see, the innocent animals were really a substitute for sinners and the animals’ blood covered human sin in God’s sight. But Jesus Christ, the innocent Son of God, took our place and died on the Cross for us. His blood is sufficient to cover all our sin and make us acceptable to God now and for eternity. No longer do we have to bring a goat or a bull or a lamb to church in order to come before God. Thank God for that! We come to God not through a sacrifice we make but through the sacrifice God has made for us. “Come to the Father through me,” said Jesus. The only sacrifice we now make, if we can call it a sacrifice, is to come to God with a humble and contrite heart. We come just as we are trusting in Christ’s redeeming blood. Christ overturned the tables of sacrifice for us. The Book of Hebrews tells us, “...it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should

take away sins for good, so Christ has appeared ... to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself... therefore, let us draw near to God by the new and living way he opened for us.”

Jesus overturned the tables. Let me finish by asking you this - *if Jesus were to stride into our midst today, would he overturn some tables?* Well, yes, he would, but there’s one thing Jesus would do first. Jesus would come and throw his arms around each one of us, and he would say, “I love you, I love you.” All that Jesus does for his church is done from love and for love. That’s we don’t need to be afraid. All he does is not meant to tear us down but to build us up. If he overturns a few tables he will also help us to erect some new and sturdier ones.

If there is a table here called “meanness” he overturns it and helps us put up a new table called “kindness and gentleness.” If there is a table here called “stinginess”, a table with some money on it that we’re keeping for ourselves rather than giving it to God’s work, he overturns it and help us put up a table called “generosity.” If there is a table in our midst called “coldness and exclusion” he overturns it and helps us to put up a table called “welcome to the Father’s house of prayer and worship.” If there is a table here called “unforgiving spirit” he turns it over and replaces it with a table called “grace and mercy”. If there is a table among us called “doubt”, he overturns it and replaces it with a table called “faith.” If there is a table among us called “half-hearted commitment” he overturns it and helps us to put up a new table named “full-hearted commitment to the King of Kings.” If there is a table here called “despair”, he tips it over and puts up a new table called “hope”.

And what I described is really not “what if.” It is happening, because Jesus the King has come among us by his risen power and presence. Jesus is overturning tables among us and replacing them with tables with that reflect his Father’s will. And he is doing it with gentleness and love. When Jesus comes our way, an earthquake rumbles beneath our feet, a good earthquake that causes us to say, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”