

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 4, 2018 (Lent III, Year B)

Sometimes you just have to cut the cord. The signers of the Declaration of Independence did this when they decided they'd had enough of taxation without representation, cutting the cord with King George and setting into motion what would become the United States of America. Martin Luther did this when he nailed his 95 theses to the cathedral door in Wittenberg, cutting the cord with the Roman Catholic Church and setting off the Protestant Reformation. Mark Zuckerberg did this when he dropped out of Harvard to start Facebook, cutting the cord with the traditional vocational path and starting a digital revolution.

Sometimes you just have to cut the cord. And, no, I am not referring to my impending sabbatical which begins in about seven and a half hours — right after S.W.5. But sometimes you do just have to cut the cord when it comes to exacting full-blown, systemic change. You can dance around the issue for only so long before something more impactful is called for. I mean, stories and parables are great but sometimes you need to go to even greater lengths to make a point.

That's what Jesus is doing when he famously flips those tables in the Temple. It is dramatic and bold and it completely changes the narrative. It's hard not to take notice when tables and chairs and money and pigeons are all flying through the air. It might even be possible to zone out during the Sermon on the Mount, but flipping tables? *That* gets your attention.

But in order to comprehend exactly what cord Jesus was cutting we have to take a closer look at the Temple. In other words, what was the point, why did it exist, and why was it so central to the religious identity of the Israelites? For Jews, the Temple, as impressive a structure as it was, was more than a mere building. It was God's dwelling place. It was a sign of the covenant between God and God's people; an external sign of the eternal promise of divine relationship.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the very heart and epicenter of their faith. And indeed it housed the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence which traveled with the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness with Moses for 40 years. Once they had a permanent location to house the Ark — which held the original tablets containing the 10 Commandments, which we also heard this morning — the Temple was built and it served as the literal House of God. The point is, it was impossible to imagine worshiping God without the Temple. It was that important to religious identity and that central to the community of faith.

So there were two reasons, really, that Jesus flipped those tables. None of which have anything to do with Jesus being some sort of hotheaded religious zealot. He wasn't the Bobby Knight of ancient Palestine. Jesus doesn't snap or lose it. He may have been frustrated and righteously angry and passionate, but this act is done with intentionality and a steely resolve.

The first issue was that over time a problem had developed with the system of sacrificial rites that had become the heart of Temple worship. The way it worked — and the reason there were money changers in the Temple — is that people of faith participated in the ritual celebration through the sacrifice of animals and the offering of money towards the temple tax. Those who came from great distances had a couple of problems here. First, they weren't going to lug an animal with them on their journey, so they needed to buy one once they got to Jerusalem. Second, the Temple didn't accept foreign currency. Hence the money changers. It was all a pretty convenient set-up for travelers looking to participate in the process.

What riled Jesus is that, in a word, corruption had crept in. What had once been a system that brought people closer to God had become little more than a self-perpetuating money-making scheme. And in Jesus' mind, this defiled the holy ground upon which the Temple had been built.

This is the major theme addressed in the account of this story from the Synoptic gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus rails against the money changers, accusing them of turning his Father's house into a "den of thieves." This grieved Jesus' heart as he witnessed people coming to the Temple, in some cases making long journeys, filled with hope and earnestly looking to deepen their relationship with God, and then being taken advantage of. The system was irreparably broken. The cord of corruption holding the Temple together had to be cut.

The second issue, which is the emphasis in John's gospel, which we just read, is a matter of location. Where is God most present? If Jesus had taken a poll, the answer to this question would have been obvious: the Temple. But with the Incarnation, with God entering the world in human form, this had changed. Forget the tables. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the entire relationship between God and humanity was flipped over.

So in offering up this dramatic statement, Jesus is making the point that God is not a building or a sacrificial system or a doctrine or even a book. God is not found exclusively on a mountain or in a set of scrolls or in a building. God is found in the person of Jesus Christ, in the temple that is his body. And this is a radical, new understanding of God's presence. Because when we gaze upon Jesus, we gaze upon God; when we worship Jesus, we worship God.

Over the coming weeks Christians throughout the world will follow Jesus as he sets his face towards Jerusalem for the final days of his earthly life. We will shout hosannas and throw palm branches along his way as he triumphantly enters the city. We will gather with the disciples in an Upper Room as feet are washed and the eucharist is instituted. We will follow the crowds to Calvary shouting 'crucify him.' We will wait with him in the tomb and we will rejoice when we learn it is empty.

We will worship God in the temples that are our churches. But we will embark on a journey of the soul; a journey of Jesus that transcends physical time and space. It is exciting and edifying and frightening and self-revealing but it begins and ends in Jesus. That is the cord that binds us to God.

Friends, I will miss you over the next four months. I will pray for you and hold you intently in my heart. It will be hard to be apart from this community because it is where I myself most often encounter Jesus. But I look forward to a time of renewal and discovery and I can't wait to hear about the spiritual growth that will take place here during my absence. I love you all dearly; I have such confidence in entrusting you to Father Noah's pastoral care and to the leadership of our Wardens and Vestry; and I know that we will come back strengthened and ready to begin the next chapter of our ministry together. Thank you for this opportunity and may God's blessing be upon us all in the days and months ahead.