

Turning the Tables and Following the Cross

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 3, 2024. Today, Jesus is showing us that when it comes to the gospel, this is the place. This is the time. Jesus cries out, "Stop making my father's house a marketplace!" And taking up our cross means turning over tables today.

Readings: [1 Corinthians 1:18-25](#), [John 2:13-22](#)

*** Transcript ***

On our first Sunday in Lent we remembered that in the Gospel of Mark, before he did anything else, Jesus was baptized, and he heard the voice of God calling him "beloved." And today, we're going to celebrate that promise of love when we baptize Eliza.

And a lot has happened since that first Sunday. Last week, after having spent time in the desert, Jesus began to teach, not shying away from the rough things that were ahead. And when Peter rebuked him, Jesus told him and the disciples clearly: if we want to follow Jesus, we have to take up our own cross and follow him. Today in our Gospel of John the journey continues and Jesus enters the synagogue, sees people making a profit out of faith, and he makes a whip, drives them out of the temple, and turns over their tables.

Christians and other people of faith have continued that tradition over the last 2000 years, continuing that good trouble that Jesus began so long ago. Fifty-nine years ago this month, 25,000 people of all ages, genders, colors, and faiths came together in Selma, Alabama to challenge injustice and claim that black people had the right to be citizens, with all of its benefits, just like everyone else.

And at the conference gathering earlier this week, my ELCA colleagues and I remembered that fifty years ago, on February 19th, students and professors at nearby Concordia Seminary chose to walk away from what had been their entire world, to an unknown future, following a cross that led them to Seminex homes at Eden Seminary and St. Louis University. Colleague Rev. Rich Wolf, who became a Seminex student after losing his housing along with everything else when he left Concordia's campus, says that journey still defines his life today. We had profound conversation for almost an hour about what it means to follow the gospel of Jesus Christ in the shape of the cross.

One of our conclusions is that following the cross is not gentle, easy, neat, or clear. It's nothing short of turning what is familiar completely upside down, and starting from scratch. Jesus doesn't negotiate, suggesting simple painless adjustments that at least look a little better than those tables where people were being sold a bill of goods every time they went to pray. Jesus drives out the injustice with whips, and turns the tables over, disrupting business as usual so everything had to change.

Following the cross takes time. Black and brown and other marginalized people seeking healing, dignity, and restoration have always heard, "Be patient. It takes time to go about it in the right way." The fight for civil rights, and specifically access to the ballot, is not new. It goes back, famously, to the march on Selma. But it started long before that, and it's not done yet. Racism still exists in our communities today. There are still tables to turn over.

The walk to Seminex fifty years ago is also, in many ways, ongoing. My colleagues and I talked about the efforts in the ELCA today to re-orient ourselves, to hear the call of the gospel in our time and our

place, and the danger that comes from thinking we've ever arrived. Rev. Wolf said he feels somewhat impatient sometimes, and longs to see the tables tipped over in our church now, so there is room for the new thing God is doing as we follow Jesus today.

The journey to the cross is costly. It calls on us to be willing to give everything to bear witness to the gospel. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went to jail twenty-nine times, imprisoned for his persistence in speaking truth for justice. John Lewis suffered a skull fracture, and Rev. James Reeb, St. Olaf College graduate and preacher, was beaten to death after daring to walk with King. After all of this, the activists considered giving up. The weight was just too much.

Those who chose Seminex fifty years ago also know the cost of this journey. They lost their school, housing, income, family, church, everything — and still, they followed. The truth of the gospel, they still feel today, was worth everything. The truth of the gospel is worth everything.

From the Birmingham jail, King explained why he persisted in following his own way of the cross. He said, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century BC left their villages . . . and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town" The faithful of Seminex felt this conviction, and gave up everything to follow the cross because the gospel called them. It was the right thing to do.

Today, Jesus is showing us that when it comes to the gospel, this is the place. This is the time. Jesus cries out, "Stop making my father's house a marketplace!" And taking up our cross means turning over tables today. It means daring to follow the cross away from what is familiar and comfortable, not knowing where that road may lead us. It means challenging injustices in our communities, and letting the Spirit guide us so we can experience and embody the gospel in new ways in our own time. It may feel a bit foolish, perhaps even unwise, but as Paul wrote the Corinthians over 2000 years ago, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block and foolishness, but to us it is power and wisdom. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

And just in case this is all feeling a bit daunting, before we go on with our worship today, before we baptize Eliza, before we join one another at the table for communion later, remember what I said on the first Sunday of Lent? The thing to remember, from that sermon, from any of our Lenten services together? God said, "You are my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." We come together in community as people of faith to remember God's promise of love, justice and mercy, and trust in Christ, whom we follow each day.

Today, we celebrate the Spirit alive among us here and now. We baptize Eliza, and remember the call of Jesus to follow the cross. No matter where it leads, from our borning cry until our final breath, the promise of God goes with us, and we are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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