

The whole setup of our gospel today feels like something out of a John Wayne movie, or some kind of Wild West showdown. Honestly, it feels like the immediate set up before the showdown at the OK Corral in Tombstone. Things have been building and building and building to the point that some sort of confrontation feels entirely inevitable. Everyone involved knows that they've reached a point of no return, something has to happen and it's not going to be anything good. Wyatt Earp, his brothers, and Doc Holliday make their way to where they know the Cowboys are waiting for them, and there's this quiet moment of pause. This moment where everyone holds their breath wondering what in the world is going to happen next, wondering who is going to be the one to dare to make the first move. And eventually someone flinches and all the tension from months and months of build up just completely explodes. There's no stopping it, there has to be a moment where it all comes to a head...the OK Corral was it for Wyatt Earp and the Cowboys...the Temple in Jerusalem is finally it for Jesus and the Chief Priests.

It would be easy to think, reading our gospel this morning that this was just another run-in between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, much like he has had so many times in the past. We jump into this text independent of anything that has happened before and so it seems fairly innocuous, just

another day of the Chief Priests testing Jesus, of Jesus fighting back by slipping and sliding through the pitfalls they keep throwing his way. The thing is though; this confrontation isn't anything like what has happened before. Because this isn't just Jesus one day rolling through Jerusalem and wandering into the Temple. This isn't just any other argument, and this isn't a challenge to Jesus and his teaching as has happened so many times before. The tables have been turned, literally, and this confrontation is deadly serious. If this were happening in a John Wayne movie, there would be ominous music playing in the background. The tension building up around all who are there, looks of contempt and fury on the faces of the chief priests and the elders, looks of worry and concern on the faces of Jesus's disciples who surround him and kind of shuffle in front and behind him to make sure he's covered from all sides, temple guards watching the exchange with a hand on their swords.

So why is this so different? Because only yesterday, Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey amidst palm branches waving and cheering crowds with Hosanna ringing through the air. The Son of David has been acclaimed as he entered Jerusalem, and the first thing he did after he came into the city was to visit the temple, and literally turn everything upside down. Jesus came into the temple and became so livid as

he saw the merchants selling and trading in the Temple that he overturns tables and scatters the merchants accusing them of turning God's temple into a den of robbers rather than a house of prayer just as Jeremiah had accused their ancestors long ago. Jesus is furious and frustrated, and he lets everyone know it. The chief priests knew what happened. The Roman guard knew what happened. The scene had been set for a show-down. Jesus left the Temple that day, only to return again the next day refusing to back down from the confrontation that Jesus knew was coming.

Jesus knew this was what was going to happen once he entered Jerusalem. He'd been trying to prep the disciples for this for weeks, telling them on three separate occasions what was going to happen once they got there— the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.” Jesus knows this is coming. Everyone knows this is coming, it's been building over the last three years that there was only one way for this to end. This is why the chief priests confront Jesus. They are looking for just the right moment. They are searching for a way to trap Jesus. They are hoping that Jesus will mess up, just enough, that they can justify his arrest. And so, with overturned tables in their heads, they angrily

confront Jesus. “By what authority are you doing these things?” These things – overturning tables, destroying property, vandalizing the temple, disrupting the peace – these are the things that Jesus has done. These are the things that the chief priests are furious about. How dare Jesus usurp their authority? How dare Jesus accuse them of systemically failing in their care of the marginalized and the needy and the poor? How dare Jesus destroy property in protest of wrongdoing? How dare Jesus call them to account for their actions when they are the ones in charge? How dare Jesus speak to them as though he knows what God is thinking, when they are the ones who have been given that authority?

The chief priests are hoping that Jesus will be careless and simply say that he does these things on his own authority and then his arrest will be easy, or he will say that God told him to do it and then they will accuse him of blasphemy. But, Jesus has had time to regroup, and today he maintains his skill and calm and deliberate attack on these powers who seek to destroy him. He answers their veiled accusation with his own question; a question about John the Baptist. John whom they had also rejected, who had been killed over a year ago. John who was the first to call out the evil of the earthly powers that spoke of righteousness but acted so very differently. John who accused the Pharisees and the Sadducees of their love of power

over love of God's people. John called them all to repentance and to transformation toward the way of God's kingdom, and they despised him, and they ignored his prophecy. John who accused them of saying one thing and doing another. John who spoke truth to those in power; spoke of hypocrisy and lack of character. John gave voice to exactly what Jesus asks in his parable today. The Chief Priests can claim authority and connection to God all they want, but when they fail to actually live out what God has called them to do? Well then that authority is meaningless. Actions speak louder than words. What we say is irrelevant if what we do does not match it. John and Jesus both accuse these leaders of a lack of integrity, a lack of character, and a lack of righteousness.

John was the first, the voice crying out in the wilderness to make straight the path for the one that Isaiah had foretold. John called out to us all that we must prepare our hearts and minds for the One who is coming who is going to change everything in the world around us. John prophesied for them and for us that the ways of this world must change. The status quo fails to meet the expectations of God, and he calls us all to repent; calls us to baptism, to cleanse ourselves and start anew, to declare our commitment to the way of the one who is to come, to turn and live, to find a new heart and a new spirit. John declares the failure of earthly power and selfish, self-

centered dominion because they are hopeless and powerless and purposeless in the face of the one who is coming, the one whom John proclaimed, the one whom John says will baptize us all not with water, but with God's own Holy Spirit. The holy fire of Jesus Christ will burn through all that is unnecessary and meaningless, all that prevents us from seeing God, all that prevents us from loving one another and serving justice. Jesus is going to cleanse all of that, scatter it, just like the money changes tables for the ways of the world brings death and Jesus Christ is the light of the world who seeks to restore life, seeks to uphold the ways of God as a beacon that will draw all of us to him.

But what does that mean for us? It means that we have to examine what we say, what we profess, what we proclaim up against what we do? Whose authority, whose call are we following? Jesus Christ is the authority by which we live. Jesus Christ provides to us the call of transforming spirit and life-changing repentance. Jesus seeks to overturn the tables in our lives that are laden down with burdens, laden down and covered with anger and hatred toward one another. Jesus Christ seeks to scatter *everything* that will prevent us from following him, from loving one another, from seeking justice for the weak and the powerless. Jesus Christ, today, shows us that he came to overturn oppressive powers who seek their own purposes and

oppose the will of God. Jesus Christ assures us that he will not rest until the hungry are fed, the grieving are comforted, the poor are uplifted, that peace is restored and justice delivered. This is the gospel and promise of our Lord. There is no doubt that the road may be difficult, but it is where Jesus calls us, and it is the path we must follow. We live by Jesus's authority alone. We live only for the sake of the gospel. We serve only Jesus. The days of saying we believe one thing and then turning around and doing another are gone. The days of saying yes, yes, Jesus we will love each other, we will care for our neighbor, we will seek out justice, and then turning around and doing nothing have to be over. We have to heed the call to turn and live. We have to find a new path, a new way of living out the call, the faith that we have been given. It's no longer enough to just say what we say on Sundays and do something different Monday through Saturday. Our faith, our calling has to inform every step we take, and some days that's going to be harder than others, but we take those steps knowing that we do not walk alone, but with each other and with Christ by our sides, ready to turn over the tables of our lives that need turning. So we put our lives, our hearts on the table and we pray that Jesus helps us to turn them. We go where it is that our Lord calls for the vineyard of our Lord needs tending. When Jesus calls you out, will you hear his voice? How will you respond? **Amen.**