

I think I've talked about *Parks and Recreation* before, because frankly it's one of my favorite shows so I'm certain it's come up before, but as a little refresher, it was a comedy on NBC which centered on an extremely high strung, type A woman named Leslie Knope who the majority of the time was the Deputy Director of the parks department in a teeny tiny town in Indiana. One of the things that is simultaneously amazing and frustrating about Leslie is that she is hyper focused and driven. When she gets an idea in her head, there's no stopping her, she just goes full boar into everything that she does, which is great for getting things done, but not so great for anything else that happens to need attention in the midst of the thing she really wants to do.

There's one episode where she and several of her colleagues get asked to head up a Model UN program at the local high school, and the kids are stoked. They know Leslie loves Model UN and that she'll put her all into making it the best experience for them possible. However, in the midst of that, Leslie has also just broken up, not amicably, with her boyfriend, who also happens to be a Model UN nerd, *and* she's in the midst of a campaign to run for city council. While she's trying to coordinate the kids program, she's also trying to manage interviews and campaign strategy, which then causes her and her ex-boyfriend to also run into a myriad of problems. They

were trying to do this UN thing together, they had a goal, a strategy, a plan, and they were actually excited about it, but then as Leslie gets pulled in other directions, their tenuous friendship starts to fray. Suddenly, the Model UN ends up being a platform for them to work out their anger with each other, the entire UN scenario they placed in front of the kids falls apart, the kids end up screaming at her, she ends up screaming at everyone else, her ex ends up telling her she's selfish and obtuse and refuses to talk to her the rest of the day, and nothing goes as planned. The entire day ends up being a complete disaster.

The day was supposed to be about enjoying time focusing on the event these kids were so excited to have. The day was supposed to be about forgetting some of the chaos that had been swirling around her life for a few minutes. The day was supposed to be about reconnecting and reestablishing some kind of friendship with her ex to help them get back to stable footing. Instead, it became a day of absolute failure, frustration, and angst. Nothing went right. Everything fell apart. Mostly because, Leslie entirely lost her where she was supposed to be putting her focus. I realize that the Temple on Passover isn't exactly a high school model UN session, but in a lot of ways the heart of the issue ends up being acutely similar. When people lose their

focus, or put their attention on the wrong things, a lot of screaming happens, and sometimes that screaming comes with a side of table flipping too.

We need to set the scene here a bit because if we don't our timetables are going to get messed up and we need to make sure that our footsteps are in line with Jesus' footsteps. We're very used to hearing this story of Jesus cleansing the Temple near the *end* of his ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have this happen immediately after Jesus' palm procession entrance into Jerusalem, but for John, that's not the case. For John, Jesus cleanses the Temple right off the bat. There's no waiting around the opportune time. There's no waiting until the Pharisees and scribes know exactly what he's about. No no, John's Jesus sets the tone early. He doesn't want there to be any questions about what he has come to proclaim or what he's all about.

Now here's the thing I want us to be clear about because I think sometimes we fall down a slippery slope of so much critique of the Jewish establishment that we slide into adjacent anti-Semitism. Like look at Jesus just smashing their tables, he must hate what they're all about. Us Christians, we know what's up, we know the real story. They got it all wrong, and Jesus told them so, and we're the right ones because we listen to Jesus. How easily we forget that Jesus is in Jerusalem, *at* the Temple, precisely because he believes in Judaism. He's an Orthodox Jewish man

who has come to the Temple to celebrate the Passover. He is well aware that yes, people need to exchange their money for Temple coin to pay their taxes. He is well aware that to participate in the Temple worship life people need to be able to buy sacrifices. *That* isn't the problem. The problem is...that's become the sole focus.

Jesus is livid because all of those things that are simply supposed to be a means to an end in order to get to the actual *worshipping* of God, have become the ends in and of themselves. Simple transactions for the sake of proper worship for the Jewish people have become opportunities to make money and to take advantage of people who are already entirely downtrodden. The words of the 10 commandments would have been ringing in Jesus' head about having no other gods before God, because all around him it seems that God's house has become nothing more than a mini mall with people trying to get as much as they can. This courtyard of the Temple is supposed to be where one comes to do what they need to do in order to prepare their heart and mind for worship, and what Jesus sees is no one prepping for worship but everyone trying to get what's theirs and see if they can't get more than they bargained for. Hearts aren't prepared for worship, they're geared towards greed and money and thus oppression and complete lack of compassion for neighbor.

That is what makes him make that whip of cords. That's what makes him flip over tables and pour money onto the ground and drive every last person and living creature out of the Temple courtyard. The people, his people, God's people have lost their focus. They're supposed to be leading the greatest Model UN imaginable and it ends up being all about themselves. They're supposed to be preparing their hearts for worship and all they can see is dollar signs. They're supposed to be striving to worship God, and they're worshipping at the foot of a golden calf of greed and taking advantage of their neighbor. Their hearts aren't in the right place, and it's ruining the experience for everyone.

Now here's the really crummy bit. We like to think that we're so much better than what these folks have had going on. We like to think that, again, because we've got our Jesus that we've got it all figured out. We don't think we have any tables that need flipping, but y'all...unfortunately we're in for a rude awakening on that. I mean let's start with the obvious comparison. It is good for us to give our offerings. It's part of who we are called to be, stewards of the gifts God has given us. But there are far too many times when we know, we are far more concerned about how much money has gone into the offering plate as opposed to how many of us have had our faith journey grow or expand on a Sunday morning. We tally our

success as a congregation, our viability as a congregation at the feet of our offering reports and if they're low, we're failing. Again, doesn't make our offerings any less important or necessary, but they're not the focus. God is.

I know this hasn't been the case in awhile, but how many of us, myself included, have looked around on a Sunday morning and gone, huh, not a lot of people here, that's not good, and that's all we can focus on. We completely lose sight of the fact that the people who *are* here, are here because they want to get closer to God and their community of Christ. We don't look around and go, man, I'm thankful these folks showed up because maybe God's about to do a new thing today, instead we tally all the people who aren't here and again, we think we're failing. Doesn't mean that Sunday attendance isn't important and we shouldn't want everyone here, but that's not the focus. Worship is.

We can even stretch this to our sometimes limited capacity to see the church as anything other than building we're sitting in, and if we're not sitting in it then church just isn't as authentic. We hold up our buildings and our facilities as beacons of our success and strength and we never want them to change or shift because then who are we without them? And suddenly we're sitting in this building not worshipping God, but worshipping the bricks and glass around us. We don't always recognize that worship can

happen anywhere when our minds and our hearts are in the right place, because we assume that our hearts and minds have to be *in* a specific place for us to really and truly get to God. Again, doesn't make our buildings any less important or tied to our identity, but they're not the focus. Being changed by God's heart is.

At the end of that Parks and Rec episode Leslie still didn't want to admit that she was stretched too thin, had made the day all about her, and had lost her focus. But eventually...she got there, she acknowledged she had some tables in her life that needed to be flipped to set her straight again. We need the same thing. It's not fun. Nope. No one wants to look at their church, their faith life, their heart and ask where God would come in and flip some tables. But Jesus did this to jar the people back to focus. To remind them that they were in the presence of God and that was incredible, that was enough, that was a thing to glory in. This Lenten season, our tables need flipped. We need the reminder that the heart of the journey is growing closer to God, settling our hearts and our minds into right relationship with the one who picks us up when we fall, and flips our tables when we get complacent or lose sight of what's important. So, today, ask yourself, what am I focused on? Where's my heart? Where's my attention? And then maybe dare to ask Jesus to help you start flipping things over. **AMEN!!!**