

**The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn**

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## **Getting Upset**

John 2:14-15

Shakespeare taught us to take heed on this day through the warning to Caesar in his play. “Beware,” Caesar was told, “Beware the Ides of March.” Of course we know Caesar was killed on March 15 so “beware” was a pretty appropriate warning. That same warning label could be used for us on this Ides of March for it is plain to see that Jesus is upset. When folks have looked at this passage they have often said that this is one of the places we get to see Jesus, the Human. Here is his full humanity on display as he loses his temper, knocking over tables and forcing out the livestock. But this is not really what we believe for, in Jesus, we meet someone who is both fully human and fully divine all at the same time and in every situation. He is just as human when he is walking on water and just as divine when he weeps. Getting upset is not just a human thing. It is awfully God-like too.

For John, that is part of the neon message of this text. All of the other gospels tell this story at the end of Jesus’ ministry. For them, this “cleansing” of the Temple, as it is often called, is the climax of his work and brings him head to head against the religious authorities who will soon have him arrested. John offers this story at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The first public act Jesus does in John is he attends a lively wedding where he turns water into wine. The second public act Jesus does in John is he rampages through the greatest religious institution of his time. John’s timeline is probably way off but he wants to make a point. God’s reign in Jesus will bring about abundant new life, so much so that even water will become the finest of wines and that new life will offer a terrible challenge to authority. This new life holds both, hand in hand.

John really wants us to get this radical message. We may have thought that Jesus is so upset because of all of the commerce in the Temple, all the buying and selling, and perhaps he was. But it was more than that. To our ears it sounds like we’re at the fairgrounds: sheep and goats and birds all in one place and all the carni’s needed to sell them but this was Passover and thousands of people were coming to the Temple to celebrate the most important festival of the year. They were obligated to offer an animal once they arrived but many had traveled too far to bring the animals themselves so they purchased them once they got there. The money changers were there so the people could remain faithful. They would bring all of their Roman money and exchange it for Temple money, coins that would not have Caesar’s face on them. In actual fact, this was not the fairgrounds; this was how people honored God. Boys would dream about the year they were old enough to join this momentous occasion for it marked their move from boy to man. Poorer families would save up for years to be able to attend.

This was the height of religious expression and Jesus has disrupted all of it. Because of his actions the people certainly could not have resumed their Passover celebration that day. Someone was going to have to clean up and get all those animals back! Jesus is not simply questioning Temple commerce, Jesus is questioning the Temple itself. With a whip in his hand we could be forgiven for assuming that this passage is about Jesus getting upset, but it is not. Not really. This is about us getting upset; getting toppled; getting turned topsy-turvy; getting disrupted. We can think of Jesus as coming to fix our lives for us, make things better, and this is true. But Jesus is not just about fixing our lives; he is interested in changing our lives, even if it takes an overturned table or perhaps a book thrown at our head.

That's what happened to Mrs. Turpin, one of the characters in Flannery O'Connor's short story Revelation. She was in the doctor's office, just waiting and waiting. While she waited she struck up conversations with the people around her. Some were to her liking and others were, what she calls, white trash. There is a girl there as well, Mary Grace, a pudgy teenager with a broken out face and eyes that sear through Mrs. Turpin. She seems to despise the woman even though they have not met. Mrs. Turpin is kind to all of them, though, for she prides herself on being a good woman. She knows her place in the hierarchy and that's enough. She doesn't have to shout it as long as she knows who she's ahead of. Over and over she expresses such gratitude to Jesus for making her the way he did, and not some other way. Just as she thanks him again a book flies out from nowhere and hits her in the forehead, toppling her. It is Mary Grace. She has flown into a rage at Mrs. Turpin. Not only does she throw the book at her but she looks into Mrs. Turpin's eyes and calls her a warthog from hell.

When they get home Mrs. Turpin tells some neighbors about her experience and they show shock and disbelief that anyone could think that about her. She's the kindest and most thoughtful woman they know! Yet, Mrs. Turpin cannot stand to hear their compliments. She is too upset and now their words do not ring true. Later that night she goes outside. She shakes her fist to the heavens and whispers into the silence, "What do you send me a message like that for?" She knows this was not a girl who had turned over her world but it was God. "Go on," she yells, "call me a hog! Call me a hog again...Call me a warthog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and a bottom!" Finally she roars, "Who do you think you are?" At that moment she sees this vision. It's a vast bridge swinging from earth to heaven and on it is a whole company of souls on their way to heaven. She sees all those she is better than, the white trash and the freaks, and they are first in line, shouting and clapping. At the very end of the procession she sees people like her, respectable and dignified people, those with common sense and decency. They bring up the end of this strange train. As Mrs. Turpin watches she sees that even they have been changed. As they get closer to the heavens "even their virtues are being burned away."

"Who do you think you are?" the religious leaders ask Jesus. Who do you think you are to come in hear and topple our most precious things? Who are you to remove both our sinfulness and those things that we hold most dear? He is Christ, the Savior, and he has come to upset us; to shake us awake and strip the extras away. Perhaps it will be our virtues that fool us into thinking we've got all the answers. Perhaps it will be our priorities that may be good but do not point to God. When it hits us it may not be pimple Mary Grace but it will be grace nonetheless. He upset the Temple so it could be cleansed. He will upset us so that we can be cleansed, so that even those best parts of us—when they do not point to God—can be burned away. So, indeed we should beware. Beware. For this is what we salvation.