

It would have been a fairly typical, though busy day in the Court of the Gentiles at the Temple in Jerusalem. Busier than usual because it was the time of Passover and people flooded the city for the holy celebrations and remembrances. The Court of the Gentiles was always busy though. It was the only place in the Temple where non-Jewish people could come to pray, and come they did. It was also always busy with the sounds of animals- turtledoves cooing, cows mooing and sheep bleating and baa-ing. The animals were for sale, pure and unblemished, for families to give to priests to offer as sacrifices. The sound of coins clinking was also a constant, as Jews traded coins bearing Caesar's image for blank coins, temple coins, to pay the temple tax required by King Herod's temple reconstruction.

So, it would have been a fairly typical, though busy day in the Court of the Gentiles at the Temple in Jerusalem. Into all this noise and activity comes Jesus, who shouts and flips over tables. He uses images from the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah and yells "my house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers!"

Have you ever been in a situation where someone actually flipped a table over in anger or disgust?

I was, but only once. We were in a hotel room in Amsterdam playing a board game with my buddy John Paul and after one too many bad draws he flipped the coffee table over sending cards sliding to the floor and bouncing off the walls.

I think it's pretty universally true that when someone flips a table over, something lead up to the flipping. In my case it was a card game that seemed unfair. For Jesus it was one more thing, piled on a bunch of other things.

Jesus had spent days, even weeks, arguing about what makes for true religion, but more than that, true faithfulness.

For Jesus, true faithfulness certainly wasn't about getting all the rules right about when to wash your hands and when to pick grains of wheat in the field, much less offering the correct animal for sacrifice. For Jesus faithfulness was about hearts and compassionate actions.

Like the Hebrew prophet Amos, quoted on the cover of your worship bulletin, Jesus isn't about the fancy trappings of religion, but about compassionate action. Immediately after he flips over the tables, he starts healing people, right there in the temple. (Matthew 21:14.)

What we see in Jesus here is passion. A table flipping passion.

Passion is a dangerous subject in Minnesota. We are quiet, reserved and don't like to rock the boat. If we talk about passion we might as well be talking about dancing and talking about dancing leads to . . .

The church for many, many years has tried to avoid topics like passion. We've gotten more comfortable, I think, both in the church and in Minnesota in saying "my passion is . . ." football or ancestry or collecting antiques. Still we rarely talk about the deep desire, the things that stir our hearts and force our limbs into action.

Last week Clay preached about the awkwardness of adolescence, when hormones and friends and everything seems broken and confusing. Once all that calms down, we reach young adulthood and for many people, in young adulthood passion surrounds us with dangerous fire. Deep loves bring lives together.

A hunger for success drives education and work.

We see what is wrong in the world and we are convinced we will be the ones to make it different, better, heaven on earth.

Now we have the tools, the age and experiences to pursue what we desire.

Love, success, justice.

And we do so with fierce passion.

Sometimes we even flip over a few tables before we get to the work of healing the broken.

I was 22, spending my first Christmas Eve with Peter's extended family. I found myself in a conversation with one of his aunts about fair-trade coffee. (It must have been an emphasis at seminary that week.) I talked to her for about five minutes, passionately describing how a person should only ever buy coffee where the grower had been paid a fair price and the growing methods were sustainable and places like Starbucks existed on the backs of the oppressed coffee farmers. "So it's never ok to shop at Starbucks?" she asked me.

"Never."

An hour later we were opening gifts and her gift to me was a three pack of gourmet coffee beans . . . from Starbucks.

Oh fiddlesticks.

At that moment I was instantly less a zealot for fair trade coffee, realizing my passion had made us both feel lousy and hadn't changed anything.

Maybe we have one too many encounters with people who told us our passion was misplaced. Or maybe we had too many disappointing elections where things didn't seem to get any better. Or maybe the war we were protesting never ended. Or maybe we changed, grew up, and our passions faded away. What was once a flame dwindled to an ember.

Enter the letter to the church at Laodicea we heard read a few minutes ago. This letter is part of a series of visions found in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation according to Saint John, this letter is one of seven written to key early churches with blessings and warnings to the churches. And Laodicea is definitely in the warning column. Their problem? *I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.*

Lukewarm.

No passion.

Laodicea, lukewarm, boring, bereft of passion. Oh Laodicea.

Oh us. With our faded, dull passion.

But here is the good news. When the prophet offers a warning, we can heed the warning and change things. Knowing we are lukewarm, our passion faded to a smoldering ember, we can say “no more!”

And do something to kindle the ember to a spark and the spark to a flame.

Remember the passion of your young adult days? Hidden and tucked carefully away? What rekindled your passion this week? Was it something in the news? A story told to you by a friend? A thought that kept you up into the night saying over and over again why?

Do something. When your heart breaks and passion whispers, say yes.

Flip a table, or at least act with compassion. Do not be lukewarm.

Are you crushed by the ongoing stories of sexual assault in the news and from your neighbors? Decide this week to talk with your teenage grandchildren, male and female, about consent. It will be uncomfortable. Justice work often is.

Did you see one too many ads on TV for this or that candidate and you're ready to flip a table? Decide to knock on doors this election and talk with your friends and neighbors about who you are voting for, and why. (We'll have some tools for voting in the coming weeks in preaching and in the forums.)

Is the news of ongoing disasters in the world overwhelming your compassion? Sign up for a seniors mission trip this winter in the Carolinas.

Jesus passion had him flipping some tables and then immediately getting back to work. He is not lukewarm- he's on fire. And we, people filled with the Holy Spirit have no excuse for being lukewarm.

We have the Spirit in us, calling us, compelling us, even screaming at us to take action.

Listen for where the passion of the Spirit beckons.

Then act.

Amen.