

Sermon: Turn the Tables
Text: John
Date: January 29, 2017
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple . . .

John 2:15

I'd like to start today, as I sometimes do, with a kind of confession. It's one you probably couldn't guess even if you tried.

Some of you will be relieved to hear this; others perhaps disappointed. But the truth is that of all the major genres of storytelling I'm familiar with, sci fi is not my all-time favorite.

But take heart, sci fi nerds--and I know you're out there. There are exceptions. Within the genre, there is one particular narrative arc that I absolutely loved and that I also happen to believe belongs in the storytelling hall of fame irrespective of genre.

This particular arc was brought to us courtesy of the writers for *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. It's centered around the conflict between the crew of the USS Enterprise, as captained by the legendary Jean Luc-Picard, and a newly discovered enemy called, simply, the Borg.

The Borg were unlike any enemy the crew had ever encountered before. For starters, they were a collective, that is, they were comprised of thousands of individuals who, together, acted as one unit.

Their ship -- a giant flying cube -- was so advanced it appeared to be invulnerable to the technology available to Captain Picard to protect his own ship, never mind defeat theirs.

So, the Borg already possessed vastly superior technology and firepower. This superiority posed an obvious threat to the Enterprise. But the Borg's mission made this threat infinitely worse: they were bent on assimilating all of their enemies, and making them part of their collective. This was their primary goal.

They expressed this goal in one of the scariest PR slogans ever mounted inside or outside the bounds of science fiction: *Resistance is futile.*

And now they had their sights set on assimilating the Federation. (For simplicity's sake let's just call them the good guys.) All that stood between the Borg and their apocalyptic goal was the Starship Enterprise, together with its famous captain and its fearless crew.

Even if you've never seen a single episode of *Star Trek, the Next Generation*, if you know anything at all about what makes for a great story, you can imagine what comes next. Captain Picard is captured by the Borg, and they begin the process of assimilating him into their collective.

So, yes, at this point in the story resistance does indeed seem futile. As Asheville's own singer/songwriter David Wilcox so beautifully put it, it was looking very much like the evil side would win.

But eventually, the crew hatch a plan. Hope slowly rises. At great risk to themselves, the officers and crew execute the plan and save their captain.

Then, together, captain and crew first figure out a way to save the Enterprise from being destroyed, and then, together, they figure out a way to defeat the Borg and save the Federation.

I'll admit that it's a stretch to say that this story is not new, that it's simply a modern retelling of the overarching storyline of the Gospels.

But maybe it's not all that far off. A small crew captained by a brilliant and charismatic leader, go up against an Empire in possession of highly advanced technology -- chariots versus prayer -- and vastly superior firepower -- swords and spears versus wine and bread.

The charismatic leader is captured and, yes, even killed. And yet hope rises. Ultimately the underdogs survive the Empire and go on to establish communities in his name all around the world.

How? Well, you have to read the whole Gospel story to adequately answer that question. And we're going to do just that as we travel the road together that leads to Easter.

But certainly the passage we read a moment ago is a centrally important part of that arc. We know it's important because this scene is one of only a handful of events that are recorded by all four gospel writers.

Except that, as often happens when more than one person witnesses a given event, these four writers all describe it very differently.

Or at least one of them did. I won't bore you with a lot of the scholarly detail here, except to say that Matthew, Mark and Luke all place this scene--the so-called cleansing of the temple--at the end of Jesus's public ministry.

But John, in very stark contrast, places it right at the very beginning. In his account, driving the moneychangers out of the temple is essentially the second thing Jesus does, right after turning water into wine at that famous wedding in Cana.

Which leads to the obvious question, why did John do this? What is it about this fraught and angry encounter between Jesus and the moneychangers that prompted John to lead with it?

The truth is no one knows for sure. Because, in keeping with good storytelling practice, John doesn't tell us. He leaves it to us to answer that question for ourselves.

What makes finding an answer so tricky is that our life as people of faith, people living in this particular time and this particular place, is nothing like the life people lived in that time and place. Our faith is different. Our culture is different. Our religious practices are different.

We do not observe the Passover. As Protestants our religion is not governed by a centralized temple bureaucracy. And we don't require adherents to make sacrifices to atone for their transgressions, or to pay for the animals to do that.

Yes, here at Warren Wilson Presbyterian, we do sometimes engage in fund raising activity, but never for selfish reasons or for purposes like the ones practiced in that day.

And yet, despite these major differences between now and then, I believe there is a through line of truth that connects our time to that time, our experience to that experience.

For stripped of all the time-specific and cultural-specific and religious-specific details, and boiled down to its essence, this is a story about what happens when institutions, particularly our most sacred ones, fail us.

And right now that story is easy to understand.

As Americans, we are now one week in to life under a new administration. I think it's fair to say that it's even clearer now than it was just a few days ago that the direction in which we're headed as a country does not jibe with some of our foundational beliefs and practices as Americans in general, and as Christian people in particular.

Indeed, I think it's not a stretch to say that for most of us here today, it feels like one of our most sacred institutions, democracy itself, is failing us.

But there is another side to this story, one that perhaps cuts even closer to the bone.

And to get at it I need to holding up two events from this past week. I'm going to ask you to bear with me here, as ultimately I may not be headed where you think I might be with these accounts.

But these stories are important.

On Thursday, our current president signed an executive order signaling his intention to start building a wall on our southern border, and to step up deportation efforts of undocumented workers currently residing here.

That very day, the day the president signed this order, the Spanish language edition of *Vanity Fair* magazine appeared on store shelves throughout Mexico and Latin America.

The cover of this particular issue featured a photo of our new First Lady, dressed beautifully, elegantly, and holding a fork and spoon over a bowl full of expensive-looking designer jewelry.

Let that sink in for a second. The people of Mexico and Central America, good people who sometimes struggle to find adequate work and to pay for adequate food and to send their children to school, gazing at the new First Lady of the United States, as she appears to be getting ready to feast on a bowl full of diamonds.

You know who didn't say a word this troubling message, this hurtful clash of status and class? The church. Or at least that wing of the church that threw their support behind her husband.

The next day, Friday, happened to be Holocaust Remembrance Day. Here in the United States we mark this day for a variety of reasons, some of them obvious and some not so obvious. One, to remember the tragic and massive loss of life, Jewish life in particular.

But also to remember American complicity in it -- how our government turned away literal boatloads of Jewish refugees fleeing for their lives. And how many of these people, including hundreds of children, were forced to return to Germany, where they subsequently died in concentration camps.

In fairness, on Friday the president signed a proclamation in recognition of the day. But in a painful break with recent presidential tradition, he did not specifically note that the six million people who died in the Holocaust were Jews.

So, a glaring omission in itself. But, as you all surely know by now, later that same day, the president signed another executive order barring, or severely restricting, refugees from seven different predominately Muslim countries from entering the United States.

A federal judge has since stayed this order. But in the in-between time, there was one group who said next to nothing about it. A group who expressed no concerns about how the order divided families, or openly discriminated against literally millions of innocent people, nearly all of them Muslims, and gave preferential treatment to Christians.

That group, once again, was the church leaders who supported the president as a candidate, and who support him now, and the church goers who voted for him.

I am saying this here, in this context, because these two actions are literally a matter of life and death for countless people. Families are torn apart. Children are separated from their parents. And speaking out against that kind of cruelty and injustice is the business of the church.

Like the Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, vulnerable people have already been turned away at our border, sent back to face a perilous future.

But these actions aren't just harming individuals and families, putting men, women and children at risk, though they are absolutely doing that. And they're not just damaging our country, making us less than what we aspire to be as a country and a people. They're also damaging the church.

Last night, I was taking in the news about the spontaneous protests breaking out at international airports all across the country: at JFK and LAX and SFO and Dulles and O'Hare, among others.

Frankly I was moved to tears that so many Americans of so many different persuasions would spontaneously gather to say no to these harmful orders and to say yes to the people affected by them, to let them know they are welcome here because this is the United States of America.

But to my dismay, I also discovered that my Twitter feed was full of comments made by non-church-going folk that all read something like this:

Hey Christians. Read your Bible. Pretty sure Jesus would not send children back to their deaths.

And here's a Facebook post from just this morning. In this era of alternative facts, it's an alternative reading of Matthew 25:

I was hungry and you told me to get a job. I was thirsty and you told me lead in my drinking water is good for me. I was a stranger and you built a wall. I was wearing a short skirt and you said I was asking for it. I was sick and you took away my healthcare. I was in prison and you took away my humanity...

That's serious stuff, difficult to read and to hear. And for those of us who care about the church, who treasure this faith we gather here to practice, it's also heartbreaking.

The good news is that not all Christians have been silent. After these executive orders were issued a writer for *Sojourners* magazine said that if you go to church on Sunday and your pastor doesn't address these topics, you should find another church because that church is doing it wrong.

Indeed. Welcoming the stranger, caring for the world's most vulnerable people, these are central pillars of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

They are a very large part of who we are and why we're here today. And right now, for reasons that remain inexplicable to me, it seems like the wider church is doing its best to undermine them.

So I've spent the weekend wondering if the anger I feel about these executive orders, and about the harm they are doing to people and to our sacred institutions -- to democracy, to the church -- is the same anger Jesus felt when he walked into the temple precincts that day.

I have this picture in my mind of him braiding that whip, and it makes me want to walk into these hyper-nationalist churches that dot our country, and that are, in my view, doing so much harm to the reputation of Christianity and Christian people, and smash their video screens and unplug all the amps to all their guitars and just drive all the people out of God's house before they desecrate it any further.

Yes, I know that's presumptuous. And yes I know that this impulse does not sound particularly pastoral. I'm just telling you the truth about how I'm feeling at this present moment.

And I'm telling you this because if you, too, are feeling angry today, that's okay. Because here is the larger truth: we are part of this story.

That Jesus, that guy who braided those whips and drove out those moneychangers, that guy who, together with his crew, went up against the Borg of his time and won, that's our leader. He's our captain.

Frankly it feels like we are now living out our version of this same story in a way none of us likely would imagined just a few months ago, or even a few days ago.

So, yes, I believe it is our duty and our opportunity to become, in effect, a community of resistance and hope in these troubling times.

Because what this story tells us--especially if you read it all the way to the end, to Easter-- is that resistance is not futile. It's essential. Indeed, as Christians resistance is our sacred duty. Caesar is not Lord. Jesus is.

But here's the twist. If we are going to engage in resistance, maybe the best place to begin is by turning the tables and focusing first on ourselves and on our congregation.

By which I mean, if it's institutions that are failing us and that need to change, let's start with ours.

And we have already. We have already pledged to become a more hospitable congregation. We have already pledged to deepen our engagement with and service to the wider community. We have already pledged to enhance our faith development and spiritual nurture and practice.

Granted when we established these goals we had no idea of the changes that lay ahead, for us and for our country, or how urgent they would become. Or that we might have to dramatically elevate our understanding of what these goals look like in practice in order to meet the demands of our time and to become the best church we can be.

But that's where we are. And so I'm pleased to say that we have already begun this work. Right now in our adult education class we're taking a hard look at white privilege and how to live beyond it, but also how we might put it into practice in the service of disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

Yesterday, together with three members of our congregation, I attended a workshop on what it might mean to become a sanctuary church. Organizers were expecting roughly a hundred people.

Roughly twice that number showed up, about a third of them people of color whose status here is now directly threatened. Some forty different faith communities and supportive institutions, including Warren Wilson College, gathered to begin thinking through this question together, of how to be communities of resistance and how to practice sanctuary.

That conversation is just starting but if you want a quick definition of what sanctuary means, it's essentially a short-hand way of describing Biblical hospitality--hospitality that welcomes the stranger and cares for the marginalized and the vulnerable.

I am not saying any of this to brag or to pat ourselves on the back. Because frankly we haven't accomplished anything yet.

I'm saying this because as we launch our ministry plan, I hope you'll find a place to plug in and to join this crew. Because our captain is calling us and we are fixin' to fly.