

Recently I received a handmade Aggravation board game. You may have played it before—you move marbles around the board, trying to get them to your home base while hoping others don't land on your space and send you back to the beginning. Receiving this gift reminded me of the many hours playing board games as a child, from Candyland to Shoots and Ladders to Checkers.

Even now, when my son Jonathan comes home to visit, we enjoy playing backgammon, a board game where players move their pieces around the board and try to get them off the board first. Back in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the board game Backgammon was called *Tables*, and sometimes a player could turn the board or table to exchange positions with one's opponent.<sup>1</sup> When the table game was turned, the one winning would now be losing, and one losing would then be winning. From that strategy came the phrase "turning the tables," where one could reverse someone's plans to gain the upper hand. Sometimes turning the tables can be a wonderful surprise, as when you're invited to

help plan a surprise party for a friend and upon arriving at the party you discover the tables have been turned since the party is instead for you.

Other times turning the tables can lead to frustration, as when you lend a friend money and he turns the tables and leaves the state without repaying the loan.

In the story we heard from John's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry turning the tables on those who sold animals and exchanged money in the temple. The other three Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—place this table turning later in Jesus' ministry, an act that prompted the authorities to take notice of Jesus and arrest him.

In John's Gospel, however, Jesus' ministry begins with the miracle of changing water into wine at a wedding feast and immediately goes into a table turning conflict. It's as though John hints from the beginning that Jesus' life would be filled with miracles and conflict, amazing acts and struggles, wonderment and chaos.

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I think that reflects most of our lives as well, doesn't it? We have good days and bad ones. Days filled with amazing events and days filled with terror. Days when miraculous coincidences create amazing patterns, followed by days when life seems to fall apart.

Those coming to the temple in Jerusalem experienced such days: joy and sorrow, hope and despair. As they came for worship, they probably anticipated a wondrous-filled event, a day to inspire them amidst their struggles of life. They may have walked many days to get there; anticipation growing with each step they took, singing songs of joy as they approached the holy city.

Some may have brought animals for the ritual sacrifice, a means of seeking forgiveness as they presented the animals to the priests for sacrifice. Those traveling a great distance may have planned to purchase animals at the temple. In order to purchase an animal, they would need to use the special temple coins, and so money exchangers would convert the traveler's coins into temple

coins—most likely at inflated rates. The travelers would use the money to purchase animals from the vendors, who were selling animals with an inflated cost. It's a bit like today going to a sporting event or concert and trying to purchase refreshments, such as a \$4.00 to \$6.00 soft drink and a \$5.00 hotdog at a baseball game.

Imagine today if I set up a table outside our sanctuary to sell tickets for admittance to communion: \$25 for a small piece of bread, or a combo deal of \$45 for the bread and sip of juice.

Jesus was outraged when he walked into the temple and saw the excessive profits made by the money exchangers and animal sellers, making their wealth on the backs of the poor, on those who traveled to Jerusalem to worship. Just imagine what that might have been like. I wonder how those who entered the temple might have felt?

[Skit: Jesus Cleanses the Temple]

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When Jesus walked into the temple, he overturned their lives. Jesus turned upside down the values of the temple marketplace by turning the tables of those making excessive profits on the backs of the poor. Those with excessive wealth found their money on the floor, for Jesus highlighted the value of people, the value of worshiping in the temple without undue burdens.

That's often what happens when Jesus walks into our lives—he overturns our sins and shortcomings, oppression and injustice; Jesus overturns our self-centered values for love-centered values.

When Jesus walks into your life, you might discover that the value of people outweighs the value of profits by offering food to someone hungry rather than storing up stockpiles for yourself.

When Jesus overturns your table, you might find him capsizing your position of always having to be right. Instead of arguing your point to come out ahead you might find yourself sitting on the side of the table of listening. When the tables are turned,

Jesus might invite you to become humble rather than right.

When Jesus overturns tables in churches, those who try to keep certain people out may discover themselves sitting and eating at the same table with those considered outsiders.

When Jesus overturns our tables, past pains may become opportunities to help others struggling through traumas you have experienced, when your painful story becomes a light of hope for someone just beginning the process, as was the case with a freshman college student who told Disciples preacher Fred Craddock about how her tables had been turned.

“I was a failure in my classes; I wasn't having any dates; and I didn't have as much money as the other students. I was just so lonely and depressed and homesick and not succeeding. One Sunday afternoon,” she said, “I went to the river near the campus. I had climbed up on the rail and was looking into the dark water below. For some reason or another I thought of the

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line, ‘Cast all your cares upon him for he cares for you.’” She said, “I stepped back, and here I am.”

[Fred asked], “Where did you learn that line?”

She said, “I don't know.”

[Fred] said, “Do you go to church?”

“No... Well, when I visited my grandmother in the summers we went to Sunday school and church.”<sup>2</sup>

That young college student had her tables turned—from despair to hope—by words she had heard in church with her grandmother. May the words you speak turn tables from anguish into anticipation, from sorrow into joy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/turn+the+tables>

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. Craddock Stories, p. 33