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WRONG RELATIONSHIP TO.....HOLINESS  
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What if you'd never read the story of Jesus as recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and just started with reading John's telling? What would you think of Jesus?

Matthew, Mark and Luke picture Jesus verbally sparring with the religious leadership, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, going about the countryside telling people what God wanted, talking about the realm of God, the kingdom (kindom) of God that Jesus claimed was now, in his very presence, was at the door. He tells parables as a teaching method. All three of those writers put this cleansing of the Temple as happening in Jesus' last week alive, when he goes to Jerusalem and ends up being arrested and killed.

John, however, puts it at the beginning. Of course, John's method of writing isn't trying to be a historic portrayal of Jesus' years - John writes like a philosopher, alternating between the very few miracles and stories he does tell, and long discourses where Jesus presents about the realm of God. John has the same aim, that of presenting who Jesus was and what he taught of God, but he goes about it all in a different way.

That struck me...so I went back and looked at the first 2 chapters of John's telling, how he opens his gospel. There's no genealogies or stories of the birth. Instead, John starts his telling with what would be an obvious parallel to Genesis, the book of beginnings - "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" - "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning, and through him all things were made." John is already equating Jesus and God, seeing Jesus as pre-existent all the way back to being involved in creation. Calling Jesus "the Word", the Greek word Logos, is already making a philosophical statement about Jesus - and we may remember, too, that God created the world by speaking, by words - "Let there be light," and so on. God's word enacted creation. After more discourse on Jesus as Light, John 1 goes on to tell about John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. This is a very thorough introduction to how he is

presenting Jesus as God, and the way he will use other metaphors and philosophical reasoning.

Chapter 2 starts with the wedding at Cana, where Jesus makes water into wine, helping out the hosts, and, by the way, keeping the party rolling. Jesus is at a celebratory event and enhances it. Following this, Jesus's zeal for God's house as a place of prayer, and not of economics or marketing, is shown in a very physical act of driving out the merchants, their animals and their money. Jesus makes a whip, and overturns tables. John shows Jesus as very human besides being pre-existent with God - he evidently values a good wine and a celebration, and he can get 'mad real good' and act on it - for the sake of God's honor and worship. So the first three actions of Jesus, in John's telling, are to be baptized, make wine at a wedding party, and drive out merchants from the Temple. Jesus is a person of action and deep feelings.

As John's book goes on, Jesus is also quite a philosopher and speaker of almost mystical subjects. He also weeps deeply at the death of his good friend Lazarus, and raises him from the dead. So Jesus is quite a complex and layered person in the gospel of John - which of course God would be, given the mysteriousness and awesomeness of God. I really enjoy the gospel of John.

This 'cleansing of the Temple' is the only story that shows Jesus doing any dramatic physical action on the part of God. It seems out of character when it shows up in the other gospels, there at the end, when Jesus had shown no other acts like it. John introduces us to Jesus with this story - it must say something important about Jesus' ministry and focus for John to put it at the front.

John wants to show us that Jesus, who is God, is disruptive of the ways of earth - disruptive of religion, disruptive of commerce, disruptive of all the side deals worship of God has mixed it up with things of earth.

Preachers I've heard have often said that the merchants were shysters, making money off pilgrims who have come from away to make sacrifices during the big feast days. They needed a certain form of money for the Temple, so they had to get their money changed. They needed animals to bring to the priests for sacrifice. So the services were necessary. One of the other tellings has Jesus call them a den of thieves, and of course it would be easy to see how the merchants could be price -

gouging with these folks who had a pressing need. But John doesn't say that - in John's telling, Jesus says, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Jesus is angered that this kind of market dealings are within even the outer courts of the place of worship and prayer. They could have set up outside the Temple. Remember that the subject of wealth and money is the topic most-mentioned by Jesus in any of the gospels, and that Jesus said that the love of money is the root of all evil - and perhaps we can imagine how he felt seeing this going on inside the place dedicated to God's honor and worship.

Obviously, churches and congregations have to have dealings with money, as did folks going to the Temple. Our stewardship of money tells us where our treasure actually is - whether on earth or in heaven. We have bills to pay whether we rent a store-front or maintain a facility like here. We have to pay our shepherd, our pastor, who coaches us on living our faith and leads us in looking deep into the Scriptures - as well as our hearts.

I've served in congregations with two widely differing views of the church and money. One large congregation wanted nothing monetary in the church but tithes and offerings - the youth group couldn't even do fund-raisers like selling sweatshirts or having a spaghetti dinner. Although... they did have catered meals for special events during Lent and Advent, and you had to sign up and pay... I could go on - they were really tight and tricky about money there. On the other side, the 5 small congregations of my first call each had their own Women's Circle, and each Women's Circle did 2 annual church dinners and bazaars! The small towns had each worked out a rotation - the first weekend was the Roman Catholic dinner and bazaar, the second weekend was the Lutheran dinner and bazaar, the third weekend was the Presbyterian dinner, and bazaar and the 4th Saturday was for any other church. Everybody went to everybody's event. You got good food, great desserts, and hand-made items. I attended many, many church fund-raising dinners and bazaars. And for youth groups. And for missions.

I don't think that's what Jesus was talking about.

I think Jesus was angry a) that pilgrims who came to worship were probably being ripped off; b) that the Temple folks had decided it was okay to let people make

money off the pilgrims; and c) that they let these merchants do it inside the Temple grounds which were dedicated to God. It's the mindset that we can use the church to make money for ourselves - whether it's selling blessed handkerchiefs, urging donations for special prayers, or ministers getting rich off the fears of the poor folks who send them money and hope for God's favor, when God's love and favor are free for all who come. Jesus does not want the world's view of commerce operating in cahoots with the faith. Jesus literally turns over the tables here; and as he continues his ministry, he metaphorically continues to turn over tables about the way faith has been co-opted by the ways of the world: co-opted in its view of who is important and who is not; co-opted in joining in the exploitation of the poor; co-opted by valuing wealth and status; co-opted by not speaking out against the injustices of the empire; co-opted by silently going along with ways that are manifestly unjust.

And it isn't just the religious system back then, either. Jesus needs to turn over a bunch of tables in our day, too. And in any day, actually. The Capital-C Church has not shown itself as a good judge of righteousness or prophetic fervor - the Capital-C Church has gone along with all kinds of racisms, disenfranchisements, red-lining of neighborhoods, dishonoring women, looking the other way from substandard housing and poor education for the poorer among us; it has overlooked domestic abuse, and the abuse committed by its own priests and pastors; it has gone to war for less than stellar purposes; and is complicit in buying goods made in sweatshops and overseas by folks receiving horrible wages; by cooperating in the ruining of our waters and air of earth, .... And by just not speaking out for the justice for all peoples God loves, and letting obviously wrong cultural mores exist. We've hidden our heads, gone along with wrong, not wanting to make a fuss - and sometimes just turning a blind eye to anything that doesn't affect us. Jesus NEEDS to overturn some tables in our faith and worship; Jesus NEEDS to be disruptive of how we turn our eyes into our own good and don't get involved with helping the suffering.

Part of the witness of the communion we'll celebrate today is a witness to Jesus' own suffering and death, and a witness to the common good of the world around God's table. Let's think on these things as we commune. AMEN.