

I’ve said this a couple of times, but it still bears repeating; that the Gospel of John is remarkably and significantly different from the 3 other gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Last week we explored the miraculous transformation of water into wine at a wedding celebration in Cana. Nothing that even remotely resembles that miracle is reported by the other 3 gospels. It’s only in John!

This week, the story we’re about to hear tells us of Jesus’ clearing the Temple in Jerusalem. This story IS in all 4 gospels, but the other 3 all say this event occurred near the end of Jesus’ life and ministry; the same week he was arrested and crucified. But in this reading, John’s Gospel says it happened at the start of Jesus’ public ministry, just after the wedding at Cana. (Unless Jesus cleared the Temple twice, which no gospel reports, it would seem John disagrees with the other Gospels about the timing of this event, in a way that we can’t really reconcile.)

Another thing worth noting. In this reading, you’ll hear this phrase: “The Passover of the Jews.” It’s an odd phrase, because Passover is a Jewish festival! Jesus and his disciples would’ve attended a Jewish festival because they’re Jewish. The phrase may reveal that John is writing to early Christians who’ve begun to celebrate Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday as a *Christian* Passover. This is among the many reasons scholars think John was written a later than the other gospels, because Christian practices of worship are taking shape apart from the synagogues. [Read John 2:13-25]

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This week I ran across an Episcopal Catechism from the mid-1800’s. I’ll give you the full title in just a minute, but here are some of the ‘Q & A’s of this catechism: “Question: Where did you and everything in the world come from? Answer: God made me and them. Question: Where did God come from? Answer: He never had a beginning. He always was... Question: Who keeps the snakes and all bad things from hurting you? Answer: God does.” [Doesn’t this sound like a tender way to help children learn about a loving God?] “Question: Who gave you a master and a mistress? Answer: God gave them to me. Question: Who says you must obey them? Answer: God says that I must. Question: What book tells you these things? Answer: The Bible. Question: What does God say about work? Answer: He that will not work, shall not eat.”

What I’ve been reading from is the “Episcopal Catechism for the Religious Instruction of Persons of Colour from 1844.” (Of course, other denominations would have had similar catechisms to provide for the Christian education of ‘colored people.’) Here we can see how easily religion – even a religion that professes faith in Jesus – can become entangled in a system of economic exploitation, supporting practices that diminish, rather support, human flourishing.

Here’s the thing. All the questions and all of the answers from this catechism are technically correct. These questions and answers are Biblically based. Indeed, there are certain people, certain factions, certain groups in our own neighborhoods – perhaps even people we work with, or serve alongside – who still today, would find nothing wrong with this catechism, because a verse of the Bible can be offer in support of these questionable answers. (And really, there’s nothing quite so satisfying as finding a certain passage of scripture that supports whatever twisted viewpoint or prejudiced opinion helps us to think of ourselves as vastly superior to others!)

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All this to say that, I think we always need to be circumspect when it comes to Biblical interpretation; and especially so when we explore passages like John 2:13-25. Because there are a number of things I’ve heard said about this passage that don’t hold up quite so well upon careful inspection...

The first thing I’d point out is how this passage is often interpreted as a revelation that Jesus is rejecting Jewish religion and practice. But as I already said, Jesus and his disciples are at the Temple to observe Passover; a Jewish festival. In fact, according to John’s Gospel, Jesus will come to Jerusalem two more times after this to celebrate the (*Jewish*) Passover with his disciples! So that interpretation doesn’t hold up.

What Jesus does object to, is the misidentification of the Temple with a marketplace. Like many OT prophets, Jesus rejects Temple practices that have been corrupted by market forces that would exploit Jewish and non-Jewish pilgrims for economic gain. There was, we know, a significant ‘mark-up’ for buying sacrificial animals at the Temple, but better that than to bring your own animal with you to Jerusalem, only to be told that your animal is

blemished and does not meet the rigorous standards of sacrifice for the Temple!

But there’s another side to the marketplace criticism. Jesus is also rejecting the misidentification of the Temple as a place where people conveniently go to get whatever goods they need or want. As one interpreter points out, there’s a pervasive marketing mentality in our modern version of Christianity. “When we move to a new town, or when we get fed up with our old church [or pastor], we go ‘church shopping.’ We want our needs met; so we shop around to see what the different outlets have to offer.” This is not altogether wrong. There are indeed good reasons to seek out a new church! But we must remember that the center of our worship is God, not us. So when we come to worship, we need to leave behind our sense of what we’re ‘shopping for’ -- or what needs we want met -- because worship is about directing our full and complete attention to God’s presence.

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A second mis-interpretation, or over-interpretation, of this passage is thinking that it prohibits any fundraising at church on Sunday mornings. Though I think we need to be thoughtful about such things, the difference is that sacrifices at the Jerusalem Temple, and the payment of a Temple tax, were compulsory for pilgrims. So the money made from the sale of overpriced sacrificial animals, or an unfair rate of money exchange, enriched the vendors at the expense of those who were coming to the Temple to fulfill their religious duties.

An equivalent today, and I thought of asking our youth to help set this up, would forcing worshippers to rent hymnals or bulletins each week before you’d be allowed to come into the sanctuary for worship. And then making a requirement that that unless you have your own hymnal or bulletin, you can’t enter into the sanctuary for worship! (This may be a good reason to go ‘church shopping.’)

An aside on the topic of money. I want to tell you that one practice in UMC’s is to have open financial records. This doesn’t mean you can see the giving records of individual members, but it does mean that whenever you want, you can ask for a copy of our year-to-date giving and expense budget. You can see how much the minister or staff are getting paid, and ask questions about any line item. There are some churches that don’t reveal this and I’d personally never attend such a church; especially as

know that some of these churches provide outrageous compensation to their pastors. To me, that is the type of marketplace religion Jesus strongly opposed.

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And this leads to the major lesson of this passage. Just as Jesus overturned the tables in the Temple, we need to be ready for Jesus to overturn -- and to reorganize -- our religious priorities and practices, especially when our practices would serve to pinch off access to God.

I don’t think it’s any accident that the gospel of John tells this story right after the miracle Jesus performs at the Wedding in Cana. Remember how we learned last week that the OT prophets foresaw an overflowing abundance of good wine as a sign of God’s new age? And that, according to that story, the overflowing wine didn’t just bless ‘insiders’; those who were closest to Jesus! The new wine blessed even those who had no idea what Jesus had done.

By contrast, Jesus’ clearing of the Temple is a rejection of any religious practice that would place unnecessary (or exploitive) barriers and rules before people who are seeking to present themselves before God. Jesus’ first act in John is to bless those who know -- and those who don’t know -- the very source of the blessings they enjoy. Jesus’ very next act is to vigorously oppose a system that sets up barriers that shrink how people may come into God’s presence and receive God’s blessings.

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Sometimes friends, as v. 22 suggests, it takes us quite a long while to get what Jesus, what Scripture, really reveals. (You see that right? How it was several years after Jesus spoke these words that his closest followers really understood their meaning?) So, I end with this word of caution: let’s not be surprised if Jesus walks into our lives at some point, flips out about what he sees, and then upends everything! Amen.