

What’s the picture you have of Jesus in your mind? What did Jesus look like and what is he like? Well, I think the artists among us would tell us that how we picture what Jesus looks like will also say something about what we believe Jesus is like. Those of you who grew up in a church – I am quite sure that most if not all are familiar with a picture of Jesus that was and still is displayed in many churches – it’s a profile view of a nicely tanned Jesus with flowing long wavy blondish/brown hair – a very serene look on the face of this Jesus; eyes looking slightly upward – and you can see he is wearing a white robe. It’s much like the kind of Jesus you’ll find when there is a film with an actor portraying Jesus – very piercing blue eyes – a calm but confident voice – and almost seems to be floating off the ground a bit as he walks around.

I don’t mean to offend anyone if it sounds like I am poking fun at such things – it’s just more that I’m trying to make a point: that these representations of Jesus have an impact on how we view Jesus – these serene portraits (and often very European looking too!)...or perhaps Jesus with the children gathered around him – that’s a popular one too...those pictures present to us Jesus the meek and mild – Jesus the enlightened teacher – the good shepherd. A beautiful picture...

So - how many churches, or this one for that matter, ever had a picture of Jesus cleansing the temple in it instead? – Jesus flipping over some tables – cracking the whip – yelling at, berating his audience - dumping out the cash registers – starting an animal stampede...seen that picture in any churches? - not any that I know of. Artists have painted the scene of course - but those pictures don’t seem to end up hanging in churches.

And it’s not really the fact that the picture isn’t exhibited in churches that I want to focus on – it’s more that I suspect that picture isn’t necessarily posted in our minds and hearts so much either; my sense is that this scene does not often take its part in our own portraits we piece together within ourselves of who Jesus is – and when that is the case, we are missing something – something of who Jesus reveals himself to be, and something

Jesus has to say to us. And here's what I think it is: Jesus has a problem with religious people – Jesus gets angry about religious stuff – Jesus has little tolerance for religion.

Now I'm going to have to say a bit about what I mean by those words religion and religious – they can mean lots of different things. But first let's just realize there is some truth to it no matter what you mean by those words – Jesus has a problem with religious types – have you ever noticed that about Jesus? Where is Jesus when he goes on this tirade? – the temple - that's a religious place; whom does he confront? – the merchants serving the temple visitors – this was religious business; whom does Jesus get into a heated discussion with about it afterwards? – the temple leaders – they're religious. If you were to take a guess on where Jesus would direct his vindictive energy you'd think maybe Jesus would go after the bad people, right? – rail against the tax collectors and prostitutes – nope...; or condemn the Samaritan heretics – nope. Who does Jesus go after? - the religious folks. And it's not just here - throughout Jesus' ministry in John and in the other Gospels too Jesus often gets most upset about religion – and he is particularly hard on religious leaders, I might add! What's Jesus' problem with religion?

Well, let's see – it's another day at the temple...the set up in the temple is really quite impressive – there's everything you need for your religious ceremony – and lots of people there to help: they'll exchange your money from Roman coins into Jewish shekels to pay the temple tax; they'll sell you the right kind of animal that the scriptures require for sacrifice and the priests will take care of things for you – you pay your tax and make your sacrifice and so it goes. And Jesus comes into this setting and goes on a tirade – turns over the tables – drives out the religious staff and religious stuff... Hmm - we've come here to church for a religious ceremony – our own beautiful temple to gather in; staff is here to guide you through what you need to do; you can put your money in the offering plate (or now even automatically from your bank! – thought I'd put in a plug for that!) and so it goes. So - what do you think Jesus would do here today? – what do you think Jesus will do here today? Any tirades for us?

Well – it depends...can we get a sense of what made Jesus so mad at the temple that day? – I don't think it was so much the content of what was happening as it was the spirit of what was happening – the motivation – the heart – the purpose. Why were people coming to the temple? Well, I believe you would have to say it was mainly out of fear and out of obligation – people saw themselves as needing to appease God and there were certain things they had to do to get on God's good side. And why did the leaders want the people to come to the temple? – because the leaders wanted control – they were the dispensers not only of shekels and sheep, they were the dispensers of God's favor, or condemnation, so they said. Hmm...I believe that much of the Church today, and for the last 1700 years or so (I can tell you more about my view of Constantine some other time), has followed much of that same pattern. Why did people have to go to church? – out of fear of God's punishment - with an obligation to do what they have to get on God's good side; why do the church leaders get people there? – to have control – to dispense doctrine about who is OK with God and who is not.

Jesus cleanses the temple of its staff and stuff that day, but what Jesus is really seeking to do is to cleanse the heart and soul of the place – what Jesus sees is that despite all the transactions going on and sacrifices being made, there is so much being lost and so little of substance created. Why go to the temple? – not out of fear of God but love for God; why make a sacrifice? – not out of obligation but out of gratitude; why invite people to come? not out of control, but to share in the true freedom of life lived as God's people. Jesus' anger is an expression of his passion for true religion – to worship God in love and praise and to live in the ways of God. Why are you here? Why did Hope Church invite you here? Why would you want anyone else here? Fear – obligation – control? Or love – gratitude – freedom? Do we have a picture of Jesus who rejects, overturns, the one and cries out passionately for the other?

And then there's the second part of this temple story – after Jesus has made an awful mess in the temple, the religious leaders have a question for him: “who the heck do

you think you are?!” – That’s what they are asking when they say “what sign can you show for doing this?” They are upset: Jesus comes in and acts like he is in charge – like he has authority in this place – ‘well, prove it!’ they say. ‘Destroy this temple and I’ll rebuild it in 3 days’ – Jesus says; ‘3 days?! – this temple has taken 46 years and counting!’ the religious leaders say. And then we’re given these comments by the gospel writer to clue us in about what is happening... ‘Jesus was really talking about his body, not the temple,’ we’re told... ‘the followers of Jesus didn’t really understand this until after Jesus’ death and resurrection,’ we’re told.

I think what is really happening here is that Jesus is making a further push against religion – there is this give and take with the religious leaders about temple construction timelines, but the truth is that those leaders could imagine nothing worse than the temple destroyed – no temple? - Without the temple there would be...nothing. Perhaps we should give them a pass for a moment on the fear/obligation/control piece of it, and simply say they could not conceive of their religion surviving without the temple. But the Gospel story tells us that is exactly what Jesus is getting at – it’s not about the temple, it’s about Jesus; the sign Jesus has is that he IS the sign – it is who he is, his life death and resurrection, that show the way to true connection to and worship of God.

There was a survey published this past week that reported on trends in religion in America – and the news for Christianity in general and mainline denominations in particular sounded harsh: from 1990 to 2008 a drop of 10% in those who identify themselves as Christians, down from 86% to 76%; and in mainline denominations like the Reformed Church an even bigger statistical drop from 19% to 13% - a reduction of almost 1/3rd. And the trends show every sign of continuing in that downward direction. And there is lots of hand-wringing about such things among Christian leaders and Christians in general. What is our reaction if we hear our temple is being torn down?...How can this be? We are a Christian nation!, aren’t we? The RCA is the oldest Protestant denomination in

the US – Hope Church has been around for nearly 150 years. How can we survive if things keep changing like this? What would we do without our temple?

Well – we love our temple, our beautiful church – and our denomination – and our Christian religion. But when we are focused on the survival of those things, this temple story has something to say to us: it's not about your church, or the RCA, or even the Christian religion as we see it today. It is about Jesus Christ - and his life given and life-giving Spirit for this world. Maybe those drops in percentages have to do with the church being a place of fear/obligation/control – and we need to be cleansed of that religion; perhaps the Spirit of Christ is at work in ways to cleanse the Church into something new so that it is not focused on its survival but on love/gratitude/freedom – perhaps we need to focus on those things, and leave the rest in the hands of our God who holds all things in God's gracious hands...?

Some people seem ready to give up on the church – I don't mean just those who have left it – I mean the trend also seen today of those who say they are followers of Jesus but don't want to call themselves Christians because of the negative associations sometimes given to that Christian term – being judgmental, hypocritical, irrelevant. But let's not give up on being Christian or on the Church just yet – or ever. Jesus wasn't out to get rid of the Jews or the temple, Jesus was after their religion – and we are confronted, called to lose our religion too – and instead be the Church which is the body of Christ. Why are we here? – to abide in and express the life of Christ for us and the world; to lose our fear/obligation/control/survival and receive again who Jesus Christ is: the God of creation and covenant and commandment; of grace, love, justice; the God for sinners and seekers, doubters and believers, servants and saints like us. Maybe a church like that won't survive, but it sure will thrive. AMEN.