

Two-Minute Bible Study: The Gospel of John

All last spring, we focused on the Gospel of Luke. I hope you learned then that Luke is a social justice gospel. Luke calls us to feed the hungry, help the poor, and overturn all the systems that oppress our sisters and brothers. This spring we will read the Gospel of John, which is very, very different from the other three gospels. John was the last of the gospels to be recorded, sometime after 100 AD.

The Gospel of John grew up out of a different set of oral and written traditions than the other three gospels, so it tells some stories about Jesus that are the same as those we heard in Luke, and many stories that are different. John also stresses different themes than the other three gospels. The Gospel of John is all about the divinity of Jesus. The whole first half of the gospel is filled with signs of Jesus' divine power – turning water into wine, walking on water – and this gospel has the most beautiful, soaring images of Jesus as the Christ figure, who was present at the Creation, and who was sent to us straight from the heart of God.

I love the Gospel of John, and I also struggle with it. This gospel was recorded at a time when Jewish Christians could no longer be both Christian and Jew. They had been expelled from the local synagogues, and this exposed the Christians to ostracism in their local communities and to persecution and death at the hands of the Romans. As a result, the language in this gospel is sometimes filled with hate for Jews, and this gospel has sadly been used to justify violence toward Jews. But we know that Jesus was a Jew himself, and his followers called him "Rabbi." We cannot let this Gospel's unexamined criticism of "the Jews" lead us to reject our Jewish brothers and sisters.

So, when we read the Gospel of John, we must discern carefully who the writer means when he says, "The Jews." Sometimes this phrase just means "the people of Judah." Often it means "religious leaders." As we go through the Gospel of John this spring, I will do my best to parse out the underlying meaning of these terms so that they don't get in the way of the beauty of the rest of the gospel. So, let us dive into this soaring gospel, recorded by people who were flawed as we are flawed, and let us be guided by the Holy Spirit as we discern God's gifts to us in this text.

Nothing to Hide Behind

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Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

John 2:13-17 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

When I was a very little girl, all the ladies wore hats to church. There were big hats and smaller hats, hats made of velvet or organdy or straw. During long, boring sermons, I loved to look at all the hats, and on very special Sundays, like Easter or Mother's Day, I got to wear a hat, too.

Hats were made by people called milliners, and there was a millinery shop on Main Street in our town. It sat right next to the haberdashery shop – which was what they called the men's clothing store. In the window of the millinery shop there were all sorts of hats. On summer days, my grandfather would sometimes take me to the soda fountain at Big State Drug Store, which was on the corner near the milliner's. Afterward, I would drag him down the street so I could look at all the hats in the milliner's window.

But the women I knew didn't buy hats there. They made their own hats. They would buy a hat form at the fabric shop and cover it with fabric that matched their dresses. Then they would take special care picking out embellishments for their hats – ribbons to match or contrast, wide or narrow; perhaps a bow or a small brooch made of simulated pearls or an artificial flower to pin on where the ends of the ribbons met. None of the women in my family would ever put feathers on their hats, though they knew of women who would. Feathers were too flamboyant for our church. But I liked to look at feathered hats in the milliner's window. Feathers felt really exotic to me.

When I asked my grandmother or my great-grandmother why they wore hats to church, they told me that the Bible says women are supposed to cover their heads in church. Or they said that it was a sign of respect for God to wear your best clothes to church. In fact, your best clothing was called your "Sunday best."

I think my grandmother and my great-grandmother truly believed that they were wearing hats to church because that was what God expected of them, and they probably felt virtuous when they put them on. But I also think that they were a little proud of their hats. They didn't mind it at all if the other

women complimented them on their hats, and they noticed and commented to each other on the hats that the other women wore.

Certainly, on the rare Sundays that I got to wear a hat, I was overly proud of my little self, and I thought that everyone should be just as taken with my hat as I was. And on those Sundays, it's just possible that more of my attention was on me than on God, and I am not sure how much energy I was able to give to worship or to prayer. All I could think of was my hat.

Now consider the people in today's scripture who were sitting at booths in the forecourt of the Temple in Jerusalem, changing money for the worshippers or selling animals for sacrifice. If you asked them why they were there, they would probably say that scripture required them to be there. The people who came to worship had to make offerings in shekels, not any other coins, and how were they to do that if no one would change their money for them? And scripture required their animal offerings to be without blemish. How could that be, if no one was there to sell them blemish-free animals? So, changing money or selling animals in the forecourt of the Temple was what God expected of them, and they probably felt virtuous when they did it, even as they made a little money in the process.

Eventually, however, worship for some people had become more about finding the right coin or the right animal and less about God. What happened in the forecourt of the Temple was taking more energy and attention than what happened in the Holy of Holies.

And here comes Jesus, full of the wrath of God, sweeping away their tables and their coins, and driving their animals out with a whip. This is not a picture of Jesus that we are comfortable with. We prefer gentle Jesus, meek and mild. But this is a story that is supposed to point us from Jesus to God, showing that Jesus acts as God acts; Jesus feels as God feels; and Jesus acts with the authority of God Almighty. So, there is something in changing money and selling animals for sacrifice that really angers God, and Jesus is there to fix it. What is it?

I think the answer is actually found a little later in this gospel, when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." That is a wonderful invitation to us, and to all worshipers, but it is also a tall order for us, and Jesus has come to sweep away every single thing that comes between us and the pure worship of God.

Jesus sweeps away the money changers, who literally stand between the people and the Temple. Even though their ostensible purpose is to help worshipers make the offerings that are required of them, for the money changers this is also a business, and Jesus sweeps them away. Our worship is not about the offerings we bring, important though they are. Our worship is about how we stand before God.

Jesus also drives away the cattle and sheep and doves that are to be sacrificed during worship, and he drives out the ones who sell them. Worship is to be done in spirit, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman. These animals are not spirit. They are three-dimensional, noisy, smelly beasts that are to be sacrificed as a substitute, a metaphor, for the true offering of ourselves that is supposed to be at the heart of worship. Jesus gets rid of them and gets rid of the people who make money from selling them. He drives them all out!

And what are we left with, when all the money changers and animal sellers are gone? What are we left with, when there is no offering in our hands, no animal to take our place, when our hats are taken away? Then, there is just Jesus and us, standing in the forecourt of the Holy of Holies. Just Jesus, who knows whether our hearts are clean, whether our worship is true. And here we stand before the Lord, without a hat to hide behind, and nothing to offer him but ourselves.

What if this offering we have is blemished? What if we ourselves are not acceptable to God? What if we are not enough? What do we do then?

Well, I am here to tell you that when we stand before God with nothing to hide us, that is exactly the offering that God wants. When we worship God with all the spirit and all the truth we can muster, that is worship rightly done. And when we bring our whole selves to God, it is always enough.

Despite what I have said this morning, I hope that sometimes – maybe on Easter – some of you will want to wear a hat. I think that God may actually delight in hats if they give us joy. But worshiping God in spirit and in truth is not about what we wear. It means standing before God with nothing to hide us, nothing to keep us from seeing ourselves just as we are. God sees our brokenness and God loves us into wholeness. God's love makes our hearts pure and our spirits clean, so that we ourselves become that perfect, unblemished sacrifice that is worthy of God.

So, let us have the courage to bring our whole selves to God. There is just Jesus and us, standing in the forecourt of the dwelling place of God Almighty. We have nothing to hide behind, and no need to hide.

Amen