

“Which Jesus?”

John 2 : 13-22

Many of you remember Murphy's Law, which said, "If anything can go wrong, it will." There are a thousand variations of that law, such as, "Buttered toast, when falling to the floor, will always fall face down." But it seems that one day in this particular house the toast fell to the floor, and to the amazement of the family, it landed buttered side up. Immediately the scientists were called in to analyze this. Did this really refute Murphy's Law, which said that "buttered toast, when it falls to the floor, will always fall buttered side down"?

The scientists secured the kitchen, told everybody not to touch anything. They took pictures and brought in their instruments, weighed and analyzed everything. They created a computer model, tested it. They reached the conclusion that Murphy's Law was intact. The person had simply buttered the toast on the wrong side.

You see, we love laws. Laws give us the assurance of an orderly universe, where there is consistency and order. When there is consistency and order, then there is predictability. If the bread always falls with the buttered side down, then we know what to expect from life, and we aren't going to get our hopes up. Life is just a whole lot easier that way. Life is much more comfortable for us when there are no surprises.

There is another law. It's not as well known as Murphy's Law. It's a law of logic, called the Law of the Excluded Middle. Aristotle invented it, and students of logic have memorized it for thousands of years. It says, "A cannot be both A and B at the same time." That is to say, something cannot be hot and cold at the same time. It can't be true and false at the same time. It cannot be right and wrong at the same time.

That's called the Law of the Excluded Middle, "A cannot be both A and B at the same time." The only problem is, it can be. You and I are two things at the same time, all the time. We are both good and bad. We are both proud and humble. We are both mean and nice. We are both sinner and saint. We are both enslaved and free. Each of us is a bundle of contradictions.

Which is why human beings are always full of surprises. The news will always have a story about somebody who was a model citizen doing something terrible, even shocking. The comment will be, "We didn't know that he could be like that. It doesn't sound like him."

But it happens the other way too. Someone that we write off as being no good turns out to be a hero or a model citizen. Unfortunately that is not considered newsworthy, so we don't hear about that very often, but it is just as unexpected.

Unpredictability is not only true of human nature, it is also true of nature. The greatest discovery in the natural sciences in the 20th century was that "A can be both A and B at the same time" in what is called "subatomic physics." The working assumption now in that branch of science is unpredictability. They use terms such as "chaos theory," or "quantum theory," where something like a photon can literally be A and B at the same time. It can be both particle and wave at the same time. In physics it is called, the Principle of Uncertainty, developed by Werner Heisenberg at the beginning of the last century. It says that in the reality beneath the surface of things, the foundation of the creation, there is unpredictability.

Think of how the Law of the Excluded Middle applies to theology. It would say that God cannot be both God and human. God cannot be both Creator and creature. God can't do that, not according to our laws. So look God, we have this law. How about

cooperating with us? Make up your mind. Which are you going to be? Are you going to be God, or are you going to be man? Because you can't be both. Even Aristotle said you can't be both. You can't take on our flesh, live our life, die our death, and still be God. It's logically impossible. It violates the Law of the Excluded Middle.

But according to the Bible, that's what happened. It's all over the New Testament. Right now we're in John chapter 2, but if you look back to the previous chapter it tells us that the Word – Who is God – became flesh and dwelt among us. That's Jesus!

Now that has something to do with the Gospel text for today, which tells the story of Jesus throwing the money-changers out of the Temple. That story contradicts our understanding of who Jesus is. This is not the Good Shepherd, who gathers up all the lambs in his bosom and takes them home. Not in this story.

This isn't gentle Jesus, a friend of sinners. Rather, this is Jesus being angry.....raising his voice....even being violent!

So what do we say about this story? What do we do with it? We could ignore it, pretend it isn't there. We could rationalize it. We could say that Jesus was just prophesying in the manner of Old Testament prophets. They dramatized their messages with what we would call street theater. Jesus was prophesying his resurrection with dramatic action. We can say that. Or, we can accept the contradiction as revelation. Then it would reveal that Jesus got real angry when he got around religious people.

So which Jesus is He? Which Jesus are we to believe in? Gentle Jesus, or the Jesus who physically threw people out of the temple and didn't even say "*Excuse me*"?

Well both, really. The short answer to this story as to why Jesus went ballistic is because people were being cheated. They were exchanging Roman currency for Temple script – yes, they were

buying script – in order to purchase animals for the ritual sacrifices required by Jewish law at that time. The money-changers who were selling the script however, were ripping them off. They were rigging the exchange rate and they were selling them defective animals to boot.

Jesus got mad because this was all taking place in God's house. That is why He started turning over the tables and driving the money-changers out of the Temple.

In truth, there wasn't any contradiction in Jesus' behavior. He wasn't any less loving because He got angry – He was just standing up for what's right.

This Bible story is one that scares children. We've all seen it portrayed in movies where Jesus clears the Temple and kicks some butts. When I was a kid, I always got scared when the movie got to that part. I didn't like hearing Jesus yell or seeing Him being violent. It made Him out to be too much like my own dad, who was himself sometimes violent – violent towards my brother and me. So – don't show me Jesus doing all that! It's too scary!

This Bible story has been used to justify abusive behavior and self-righteous attitudes. *“If Jesus showed up here today, I just know that He would throw so-and-so out on his ear, or her ear!”*

So what are we, the church in the 21st century to make of this Bible story today? How does it apply to us?

What it really means is, our church cannot control God. When God acted to save the world, he didn't do it in a church or a temple. He did it on a cross, at a place outside the city where they execute criminals, and in a graveyard where people weep. The church cannot control God. All the church can do is point to God. So if what goes on in here points to God, then it's okay. If not, get rid of it.

There might be a little bit of the money-changer in each of us. It doesn't mean that we are necessarily dishonest, but it does mean that none of us are perfect. We aren't even close! We are, after all, each one a bundle of contradictions. Bad and good. Sad and happy. As Martin Luther said, we are "*Simultaneously saints and sinners.*"

We need not fear that Jesus is going to throw us out of the Temple. But He MIGHT throw out that which keeps from following Him and being His disciples. Let's just make sure that we aren't still holding on to whatever it is when He finally throws it!

AMEN.