There are two common misconceptions about Jesus that get cleared up in today’s reading. The first is the idea that Jesus was, in all times and all places, meek and mild. I don’t know why but for some reason Jesus often gets portrayed as a groovy flower child who doesn’t want to lay a weird trip on anyone. The part of the passage which reads “Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple” should quickly dispel that idea. Because I assume that the people who were driven out had not intended to leave so soon meaning that for Jesus to have changed their minds so definitively, he must have presented them with a fairly menacing disposition. Also, I’m sure the whip of cords helped a bit just like it did with Indiana Jones. The second sort of myth that gets dispelled in our reading today is what I will call, for lack of a better term, the “How would Jesus vote” version of the Son of God. Since we just came through an election, I am probably a little more sensitive to this one. But if you remember back a few months we heard a lot about God’s opinion on who should be elected. In this version of Jesus his primary mission on earth was to make sure that our chosen political candidate got elected. But if you read the New Testament it is rather striking just how little Jesus says about politics. When the Pharisees tried to entrap him with a question about Roman tax practices, he punts. Similarly when Pontius Pilate demands to know if he is a king he punts again. Jesus stayed pretty far away from Roman politics but not from temple politics as we see today. Jesus never stood outside the praetorium dressed as a character from the *Handmaid’s Tale* chanting “hey hey ho ho Roman oppression has got to go.” But he did make a whip of cords and chase people out of the Temple yelling, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” And when these two correct understandings of Jesus are taken together they serve as a very good reminder for us about where, as Christians, we should focus our energy – we should focus it on the actions that are supposed to take place in the Temple.

That is the great take away. The thing that should make us the most distraught is when we are not able to take part in the worship of God. We have John’s version of the story this morning but in Matthew’s version Jesus explains why he is chasing those out of the Temple out saying, “My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you make it a den of robbers.” Those who are buying and selling have obscured what the purpose of the temple is and have so blended it with the secular so that it is no longer sacred. Jesus’ statement is not against commerce per se but rather about keeping the things of God separate, so that when we come to the Temple we may go and interact with the holy. If we want to get upset about something and make a big stink about it maybe we should reserve it for when the things that should be set aside for God are no longer set aside for God. Because this is a really big deal from God’s perspective.

Our first reading was from the Ten Commandments and if you were paying attention you may have noticed that four of the ten are about setting aside the things of God. We are told, “you shall have no other gods before me” and “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” Number three tells us “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” which is followed by the one that is even more forgotten now days, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” Isn’t it interesting that 40% of the Ten Commandments deal with reserving awe and reverence for God and keeping our interactions with him holy. And so, we need to ask why this is so important to God and by extension, why this should be important to us. And the answer to this is a little hard to give in our day and age where we often only think of something as worthwhile only if it does something tangible for us.

Let me explain what I mean. If you watch many commercials or anything in marketing the argument made is generally that if you use whatever product you can expect a given result – use our toothpaste and you get whiter teeth, fresher breath and the chicks will dig you. Restated the understanding is this: if you take this physical action you will obtain this physical result. And such a mentality seeps into church. If you ask someone why you should go to church you might hear answers like you will make friends, or you can feed the poor, or help put an end to violence and so on. Now none of these are bad things but that is not what Jesus gets upset about today. He gets upset about the fact that the Temple is not being used as a house of prayer. It is not being used to allow people to deepen their relationship with God. And such an understanding does not fit into the physical for physical transaction that we are so used to. When we leave Church there is not machine that will measure how our relationship with God has been enhanced during our time there. Certainly, in worship we may pray for someone to be healed or that we get a good grade on our German test but prayer at its essence is an act of worship. It is a way of drawing closer to God. If God is who he says he is and we believe that to be true then we are obligated to worship him. There is no transaction and I know this may sound harsh but we should worship God even if we get nothing out of it. Worshiping God and praying to him are an end in and of themselves. Drawing ourselves into the presence of God so that we may be more like him should be enough. Much of the reason that God spends 40% of the Ten Commandments defining the holy is so that we may be drawn into it and not mistake it for the secular.

The church goes astray when it makes our relationship with God transactional because then the church is no different from any other institution on our society. Jesus was quite literally upset at the transactions taking place inside the temple today. People were showing up at the Temple needing a sacrifice so naturally some enterprising individuals set up shop to give the people what they needed for a reasonable or maybe not reasonable price. If you needed a few doves they would take care of it and if by chance you have had a really off year, they could also get you a goat or two. The sacrificial system which was meant to break down the barrier between ourselves and God had become nothing more than another transaction -- buy this, sacrifice it and your sins are gone. And while we don’t have this system today it fits the same paradigm as us showing up with a preconceived notion of how we will get God to take care of whatever it is we want. Transactional systems seek to change God whereas true worship seeks to change us.

Edgar Allen Poe writing in 1850 on the subject of poetry said this, “this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.” Similarly, we worship God for God’s sake. This is where we need to start. We come to church not to meet friends or get our political fancy tickled rather we come for the sake of God. All distractions be they money changers or coffee shops need to be evicted so that we can be in a house of prayer. If someone asks why we go to church or why we pray the answer is simple – to be in the presence of Almighty God. The holy must stay holy. St Athanasius said “God became man so that man might become God.” That is why we enter into God’s presence. To be drawn towards him this day and forevermore.