**March 8, 2015 – 3rd Sunday of Lent**

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I was having a conversation awhile back with someone who was going through some challenges and who was angry with God. As our conversation went on, we came to the conclusion that God is many things, but God isn’t nice. And that it was okay.

That may seem a bit shocking for a priest to say, so let me explain a little. Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines “nice” in a number of ways:

First of all, it gives some overall definitions, such as giving pleasure, good and enjoyable, attractive or of good quality, and kind, polite, and friendly. Well, those don’t sound too off the mark to apply to God, I guess. But then it gets more specific, such as:

* Showing fastidious or finicky tastes
* Exacting in requirements or standards
* Possessing, marked by, or demanding great or excessive precision and delicacy
* Pleasing, [agreeable](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agreeable)
* Well-executed
* [Appropriate](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/appropriate), [fitting](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fitting)
* Socially acceptable
* [Virtuous](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtuous), [respectable](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/respectable)
* [Polite](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polite), [kind](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kind)

All of these, even the more general ones, are attributes that humans value in one another. They are traits that help us get along in life, at least until they are jettisoned in favor of greed, meanness, and cruelty, all in the name of getting ahead. The very impermanent nature of being “nice” shows that it isn’t characteristic of God.

Which brings us to today’s Gospel. The story of Jesus turning over the tables in the Temple is in all four of the Gospels, and Jesus isn’t nice in any of them. But in John’s version, he’s even less nice than in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

First of all, John’s Gospel is the only one where Jesus uses a weapon – a whip of cords, that he made on the spot. It’s not clear whether he used the whip only on the animals, but it was certain to cause chaos in any case, with all the animals running away and the owners trying to round them up again.

Second, in the three synoptic Gospels, Jesus clears the Temple at the end of his ministry, after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This deliberate action gives his enemies one more reason to try to have him disposed of, and sets the events of Good Friday and Easter in motion.

In John, however, Jesus clears the Temple at the beginning of his ministry, just after the wedding in Cana and his first miracle. So if he was taking this action in order to provoke the Jewish authorities and the Romans, it fell pretty flat. They probably didn’t even know who he was yet, much less that he was someone to be thought a threat to their rule and way of life.

And finally, in John, Jesus doesn’t complain that the money changers are making the Temple a den of thieves, in which case it would make a certain amount of sense to get rid of them. He only tells them that his Father’s house shouldn’t be turned into a market. He doesn’t seem to be judging WHAT they’re doing, only that they’re doing it in the Temple, namely the everyday running of a convenience store. The fact that Jesus’ disciples suddenly remember, “Aha, Psalm 69 – Zeal for your house will consume me! Well, THAT explains it!” doesn’t actually explain anything at all. In fact, it almost seems tacked on, which was a common practice in the early days of the New Testament.

This is really kind of a weird episode in Jesus’ ministry, in other words. In the other Gospels, Jesus going crazy in the Temple at the end of his ministry and further ticking off Jewish authorities who were already inclined to want him gone, makes a certain amount of sense. But here, they just ask him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" In other words, what gives you the right to mess up our shopping center? They’re there, and they’re concerned, but they don’t seem particularly mad at him at this time.

But Jesus doesn’t even give a straight answer to a reasonable question. Instead, he tells them that if the Temple were to be destroyed, he would rebuild it in three days. This has everyone scratching their heads, and maybe the authorities scoffing a little, although the disciples will remember what he said here, after his resurrection.

Really, this is John as his obscure best. It’s most likely that to John’s community, which was a very specific group of Jews who had been excluded from regular Jewish worship after they became followers of Jesus, this was coded language that they understood very well. But we’re left trying to figure out what it means to us. And, as I said, Jesus isn’t at all nice in this story.

I don’t know about you, but a non-nice Jesus, or a non-nice God, make me just a little uncomfortable, in spite of coming to that conclusion with my friend. This is probably because I would really like to fit God into a box of my own building to my own specifications. And I don’t think I’m alone in this activity. A lot of people try to make God over in their own image. We want a comfy, nice God, who does what we say.

Or maybe some people want a mean, exclusive God who will keep certain people out of the Kingdom because they don’t measure up to what those people think God’s standards are.

Well, I think I can say with some assurance that we’re all wrong. God isn’t nice and comfy, and God isn’t mean and exclusive. God is way more than that. God isn’t nice, he’s loving. God isn’t mean, he’s just.

A nice God would make sure no troubles enter our lives though it would also mean that no joy could be there either. But a loving God comforts us in our troubles and gives us strength to endure them, and rejoices with us in our gladness.

A mean God would adhere to some sort of “X number of strikes and you’re out” rule, and take delight in keeping people out of the Kingdom. But a just God judges us with mercy and compassion, and gives us chance after chance to return to him.

Frankly, although it’s a more difficult road, and in spite of what I said I wanted, I’d really prefer to travel with a loving, just God by my side. God won’t be nice to us. But he’ll love us. Always. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Nice doesn’t last, but God’s love lasts forever.

Amen.