

Askew? Bless you!

Question for all of you: How many enjoy journaling? Journaling is a widely held practice, aimed theoretically at allowing us to process the day's trials and provide a bit of cathartic release. I've never been one for journaling. Perhaps it's because in doing so, the hideous nature of my penmanship would be on display, or maybe it's because my mind doesn't work in a linear fashion - never mind the need for incessant use of the eraser or crossing out pen marks.

Some people use apps for journaling purposes, while others use good old-fashioned pens and paper. Here's something interesting - there are some who enjoy journaling on a blank piece of paper, no lines, no guidance.

Be honest, how many of you, if given a blank piece of paper, could write in a straight line?

The trick to writing in a straight line is to write the first word straight and then line up the rest with the preceding word.

Conversely, those who struggle to write in a straight line do not go back to the beginning to check if the word is straight. They assume that because the new word matches the previous word, it's in line with every word on the page.

Often, they are deceived because they miss the subtle incline or decline of the word only a few words into the writing.

When this happens, they must decide whether they will continue writing on the angle until they get to the end of the page or make a midcourse correction.

Most choose the angle because at least all the words are moving in the same direction, even if they're not in line with the dimensions of the paper. Few have the courage to “mess up” the page by straightening out the next line, which will make the writing look inharmonious.

Do any of you have an idea where I'm going with this? Good - because it has more to do with our faith than you know - for the challenge of writing words in a straight line presents a similar challenge we have with our discipleship.

In church, there can be a subtle decline of our individual and corporate faith and worship without our recognizing it. We don't recognize it because we only go back a few years, maybe a generation or so, and line up our practices from there. We don't go back to the original practice or intent to translate it into faithful action in our time and place. And then the moment occurs when someone has the nerve to go back to the “first word on the page,” and we see that we are askew.

At this point, we must decide whether we will continue that slanted trajectory, contradicting the dimensions of the page, or make the mid-course correction at the expense of revealing our sloping tendencies.

Now, if the past couple of years of cinema have taught us anything, it's that there is nothing new under the sun, and in this way, we find a point of contact with our Biblical predecessors.

So here we are, Jesus is in the temple. This is the very temple that he had worshipped in since he was old enough to remember, and he understood that the temple was a particularly holy place, and that it was where God dwelled, or at the very least, it was where the Jewish people believed God dwelled.

Second, only to being God's dwelling place, the temple also served as a place of ritual sacrifice for the sake of purging one's sins. Yet, somehow along the way, the purpose and priority of the temple changed. Things that were once seen as peripheral to the temple's function became central.

Of note are the ways in which animals were sold in the temple.

For one's sins to be eradicated or transferred, you needed to have an animal sacrifice. And maybe the practice started out with the best intentions, that they wanted to provide resources for those who were traveling from far away, but at a price.

In other words, worship was co-opted by commerce. The temple became a marketplace, rather than a place to meet God. Instead of returning to the first word on the page, rather than going back to its original intent and keeping that primary, the temple became a vehicle for economic profit at the expense of spiritual gain.

Askew.

Jesus understood this, and while there is no evidence that Jesus' actions in the temple fundamentally altered those practices, his actions, symbolic as they may be, pointed to the slanted nature of the temple practices.

And the real kicker here is that it wasn't only the temple that was slanted; the culture was slanted too. All of the words on the page were slanted in such a way where money preceded the will of God, feeding the poor, reaching out to the "least of these," practicing social and economic justice, and worshiping God in spirit and in truth.

What Jesus is trying to get people to see is that they need to get their priorities straight; the business of the temple must be the business for which God has established. They cannot allow the culture to dictate its agenda, leadership, mission, or its standards. They must be prepared to follow God even when it means moving against culture.

There's a phrase that I use from time to time, and it applies here: what we're seeing today is a difference in degree but not in kind to what occurred in the temple.

Essentially, we need to be confronted with the way in which the culture around us enters into the church. It's not saying that culture is inherently bad; it's saying that we should probably be judicious in which practices are adopted from the culture.

I look at our culture, and I see violence and aggression everywhere. I see suffering that seemingly no one cares about, and I see division akin to David and his brothers. Isn't the one we follow the one who builds bridges? The one who says to put our swords back in their sheath and cares for the needy? Or are we just happy with the knowledge that Jesus is our punch card into heaven?

Friends, we live in the world, but we're not called to act as the world acts. I have no doubt that we're all at some point or another going to be lured into the proverbial marketplace of the temple - faced with

temptations of all sorts. But in those times, think about journaling - the blank page - and better yet, think about the first word.

We all know what the first word is for us. John 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." So, where do we look for salvation?

Are you sure that everything isn't negative? That's not my purpose today. All I want to highlight is that there are always going to be people who try to skew the gospel, and our calling is to rebuke their teaching and then show the world why our faith matters, why Jesus makes a difference, and why the first word on that page is the only one that matters. Because if we're not aligned with that, if we're not aligned with the Word of God, loving each other, giving our praise to God, then the church will have truly failed to do its job on this Earth.

We don't like getting our tables flipped. We don't like being confronted with uncomfortable truths. But that's our Savior. Jesus calls us out, albeit in loving ways, but nonetheless. This time, we are presented with the perfect opportunity to see how our lives, both individual and corporate, align with the Word of God.

Are we living out the greatest commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor? And if so, how? And harder yet, are there any practices that need some course correction?

This is the life of a Christian. It is a life of rising and dying to sin every day. It is a life of accepting that our life is not our own and is meant to be used in service for others. And it is a life meant to be rooted in the Word of God, living out our baptismal promises, speaking truth to power like Jesus, and resting securely in the knowledge that while the earth and its practices may pass away, the Word of our God will never pass away.

This day, I pray that Jesus continues to flip tables and in the process of doing so, might we align our lives evermore with our Creator.

Amen.