When I was in 7th grade, my class did a fundraiser for… something, I don’t really know. All I remember was that we had to sell t-shirts. Being the relatively shy kid I was, I was not about to go out and try to sell shirts to strangers. That meant I was limited to family and friends, so I took my box of t-shirts to where all my friends were: I set up a display table in the narthex of my church.

I don’t remember if I sold many, but I do remember one of our family friends, Pat, confronting me about how I should be selling t-shirts in the church. It was something about which he felt very strongly, based on this story we read today. I loved and respected Pat, when I saw how upset he was, I felt terrible. Relationships have always been very important to me, and the possibility that I had done something—even unintentionally—to put my relationship with him in jeopardy made me feel sad and guilty.

Now, Pat is not the bad guy here. He approached me, very respectfully, because he felt strongly about this, and he felt it was important for me to know that what I was doing was wrong. He read this story and took it at face value: the temple—or the church—is not a marketplace; that’s not what it’s for, and it’s not how God wants to relate to us.

I always think about that when I read this story—about those stupid t-shirts and how afraid I was that I might have damaged that relationship with my friend. But each time I read this story, I also think that I have to—respectfully—disagree with his interpretation of this text.

It’s a complicated story to unpack, partly because the way St. John tells it is different than the way any of the other gospel writers tell it. St. Mark quotes Jesus as saying, “You have made my Father’s house a den of thieves,” implying that there is something shady happening here, and St. Matthew and St. Luke follow suit. But in John’s story, Jesus says “marketplace,” not “den of thieves.” According to John, there doesn’t seem to be anything immoral or crass going on here, just honest business.

You see, just before the Passover, people would come and offer sacrifices at the temple. Originally, when the temple system was set up, most folks had livestock of some kind because Israel was an agrarian society. Everyone had easy access to a cow or a goat or dove, either from their own herds or flocks, or by trading with a neighbor.

But by Jesus’ time, the folks in Judean cities were about as likely to have livestock as you or I. So, in order to make a sacrifice, they had to buy one. And, since the 2nd Commandment, which we read today, forbids the use of “graven images,” the Roman coins with the image of Caesar ‘graven’ on them could not be used in the temple; they had to be changed for “non-graven” coins. That’s what the money changers did. All this infrastructure was set up to facilitate the regular, legal, institutional worship of God in the temple as commanded in Torah.

That is what makes Jesus’ action so memorable. He isn’t “cleansing” the temple, he’s destroying it—symbolically, at least. He’s making it so that people are unable to fulfill their biblically mandated obligations for worship. The building may be intact, he’s completely disrupted the infrastructure; not because anybody was doing anything wrong, but because the system itself—the temple ordnances and practices as outlined in the Torah—was wrong.

Maybe “wrong” is too strong a word, but let’s unpack it. The Laws—given by God to Moses, who gave them to the Hebrew people in the wilderness—were intended as a gift, a fresh start. It was a set of rules for life together, life as God’s people rather than as Egyptian slaves, which was the only life they’d ever known. The laws were intended to help people know God by showing them how God intended for them to live in community. Unfortunately, it’s a lot easier to judge whether or not a rule has been broken than it is to meditate on it to figure out what the rule teaches us about God; and so, we end up placing a lot of weight on the rules themselves rather than the God who gives them.

I think Jesus sees this: he sees how the concept worship seems to have devolved into a transactional system of sacrifice, and that makes him upset—so upset that, instead of lodging an official complaint or teaching an alternative, he grabs a whip and starts flipping tables. And when the folks in charge ask for a sign, some argument to justify his action or proof that he has the authority to do this, he points to himself: “he was speaking of the temple of his body.” Jesus is, himself, the sign.

I wonder if what made Jesus so angry—angry enough to break things—was that he was so saddened that this is the only experience of God that people had at the temple: the experience that sad, guilty feeling of a person who’s ruined a relationship, intentionally or not, by breaking the rules. Our relationship with God had become strictly transactional: we do this, God does that in return. I can’t help but think that, in symbolically destroying the temple, Jesus was trying to destroy our misconception of a legalistic God who only cares whether or not we keep all the rules.

Instead of this transactional God, Jesus presents himself as the alternative: a relational God, a living person with whom we can converse, reason, argue; a person to be embraced and loved, or rejected, even killed. He invites us to deal with God relationally, not transactionally, and he is himself the sign that God wants to deal with us the same way. God doesn’t just love or bless us when we perform the proper ritual actions or fulfill the requirements, nor in order to get us to do those things, but *whenever God feels like it*, because that is *who God is*.

This is God’s covenant, what God desires to convey in the Law: that God’s love for us precedes anything we might do or say or believe for or about God, and that we are invited into this relationship, not independent of it. The covenant is that God always loves first, and constantly invites us into that love. The law is not a list of rules to follow, but a description of what that love looks like in action for people who haven’t ever experienced it firsthand, not really.

To reduce that love to a set of rules—or to a collection of religious doctrines—seems to me to miss the point entirely. It seems to only continue on in that same transactional view of a God who refuses to offer love or blessing unless the terms are met. This isn’t a story about whether Christianity is superior to Judaism or whether or not sacrifice is necessary or which rules we need to follow; I can only see this as a story of Jesus trying desperately to point to a reality that is too fantastic, too sweeping, too profound for us to ever reason out on our own.

If this is true, if God doesn’t simply judge us “good” or “bad” based on how well we happen to live up to God’s expectations, what does that say about how we might judge one another? If God deals with us relationally, rather than transactionally, and wants us to do the same for God, how might God hope for us to deal with one another?

It’s so easy to see other people as “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong” depending on how they meet the expectations we have of them; in other words, to deal with them transactionally. But Jesus invites us to consider another way; to live relationally rather than transactionally, to recognize that people—both ourselves and our neighbors—are more than our best or worst actions; or as Luther would say, that we are all both sinners and saints.

When Pat confronted me that day, I felt really hurt, but that’s not the end of the story. Pat and I continued in that relationship and because of that, there are a lot more things that come to mind when I think of him. I think of how he gave me a job in high school, and all the dirty jokes he loves to tell. I think of all the meals and beers and stories we’ve shared, all the discussions and arguments we’ve had. I remember how he helped me make the urn for Dad’s ashes when he died, and the love and support he’s given to my family since. That is why, even though I disagree with him, I will always love and respect him.

That’s relationship. It’s too complex to be boiled down to a handful of good or bad moments, it’s this big, messy, beautiful thing that just keeps growing. And that, I think, is what Jesus was trying to teach us about God and God’s covenant in that moment in the temple. Covenant is not a contract with rules and consequences; it is the promise of living, organic relationship founded for all time on the deep and abiding love that is at the core of who God is. Because of that foundation, it can never be broken, not really, because that love is strong enough to withstand even rejection and exile, to rebuild temples, even to come back from the dead.