

Whenever I attend a fair with a midway, one of my favorite rides is the Tilt-A-Whirl.

It's the ride that uses centrifugal force to pin you to the walls, while it spins around really fast and the floor falls out beneath you.

It may sound terrifying, but it's actually quite fun.

This ride is how I learned what centrifugal force was, it's the force that pushes energy outwards.

Now, there's another kind of ride that I also like, it's the giant swing.

The one where you sit in the little seat and the swing goes up and as it goes off the ground, it starts to spin.

When you're spinning around, you feel like you're being pulled into the middle.

It's kind of like when you are making a turn in your car and you feel like you're being pulled further towards the direction you're turning.

That's centripetal force, it pulls the energy towards the center, and centrifugal force pushes energy out.

My dad is a physics teacher, please don't tell him that everything I needed to know about physics, I learned from rides at the state fair.

So, if we think about the church, are we more of a centrifugal force, pushing people out into the world?

Hopefully not away from the church altogether, but are we operating with the church as the hub of energy that pushes us to engage the community around us?

Or are we more of a centripetal force, which pulls people into our center, our vortex?

I think we should be centrifugal, but I worry that we are more centripetal.

Here's why.

I will tell you a story about the common behaviors of churches, and you see whether you think we fall into that trend.

David Miller is a clergy coach and he tells the story of working with large groups of clergy and what happens when he asks them the following questions...

He starts by asking them, *"How many of you, at the beginning of a new program and school year recognize Sunday School teachers, inviting them to stand, "installing" them, and/or praying for them?"*

Usually all the hands in the room go up.

*And how many of you, he continues, after your annual meeting and election of new church council members, recognize them during worship, "installing" or "consecrating" them and/or praying for them?*

Again, almost all the hands go up.

*What about your youth?* Miller goes on.

*When your youth group goes on a mission trip, how many of you commission them before they go or pray for them while they are away?*

By this time, of course, the response is predictable, as most of the hands are raised.

*One more question, Miller then says, how many of you, come late March or early April, invite all of our Certified Public Accountants to stand and pray for them, knowing that for the next several weeks they will work seventy hours or more and that their labor keeps our tax system and government functioning?*

And now there are almost no hands raised in the air.”

(Lent 3B: Lighting Centrifugal Force, [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net))

And who here prays for the salespeople who work on commissions at the end of the month or the quarter when quotas are due?

Now there's silence and eyes drop to the ground.

Those are all the examples he uses, but I could think of more.

How many churches pray for and bless teachers at the start of a new school year?

How many of us pray for retail and restaurant workers at the start of the holiday season?

We are pretty good at praying for people in our church, doing the work of our church, but not so good about praying for and supporting the other ways in which we engage with the world.

The problem is that this keeps the energy within us, centripetal, focused towards the center.

It's not externally focused, pushing outwards, beyond these walls.

In today's scripture lesson, Jesus got angry because the Jews were too internally focused, their energy was totally consumed by the Temple and anything that had to do with the Temple.

They weren't outwardly focused at all.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself that you thought this was the well-known scripture in which Jesus got angry because they were exchanging money in the temple and they had turned what was supposed to be a house of prayer into a den of thieves.

You're half correct.

In the synoptic Gospels, bear with me for a minute, also known as Matthew, Mark and Luke, that is what happens.

And Jesus causes this table-turning scene in the Temple right before the Passover meal.

It's the last thing he does which really causes the Roman authorities to go after him.

It's sort of what gets the ball rolling that leads up to his betrayal, trial and execution.

The Gospel of John, that we heard this morning, is a bit different.

In this Gospel, Jesus turns over the tables at the beginning of his ministry.

And he doesn't say that the Temple has become a den of thieves.

He only says that it has become a marketplace.

The reason why the story is located at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is because the writer of the Gospel of John is trying to establish Jesus' identity as the Messiah.

John wants readers to know right out the gate who Jesus is, with no room for doubt.

The reason for Jesus' anger in this story is also slightly different from the other Gospel versions.

In this story, Jesus is angry because his followers don't understand that the Son of the Living God is standing right in front of them.

He was really direct about it too.

Listen to the way John recounts this conversation between Jesus and the disciples:

*“Jesus tells them ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’*

*The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?'*

*But he was speaking of the temple of his body." (John 2: 19-21)*

Unfortunately, Jesus' disciples didn't have the writer of the Gospel of John to explain it to them, so Jesus' message that he was the Temple, was unclear to them.

The next verse says, *"After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said [the temple would be raised in 3 days];*

*and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." (John 2: 22)*

But that's why Jesus got so angry, because they didn't know it at the time.

They were so impressed with the brick-and-mortar, the beautiful ornate Temple that rivaled King Solomon's and took 46 years to build, they made an idol out of it.

The energy around the temple was centripetal, inwardly-focused and Jesus wanted it to be centrifugal, outwardly focused, on him, his teachings, and making disciples of all peoples.

Jesus specifically got angry at the exchange of money in the Temple because this practice was what was needed to keep the Temple in operation, and he wanted to do away with all of it.

People would change their Imperial coins for the local currency, that's what the moneychangers did.

Then, they would use that currency to buy animals which would be sacrificed to atone for the sins they had committed.

It was also the Temple's way of staying in business, of making money to maintain the property and pay the priests.

Jesus was infuriated because he believed the whole system was corrupt.

He wasn't just taking issue with one small part of it, he was calling for a complete dismantling of the system of exchanging money and buying animals to be used as sacrifices.

The writer of the Gospel of John believed that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice, and was trying to communicate this to his readers.

Jesus was trying to usher in a new era in which the grace of God was no longer mediated or accessed through cultic sacrifice but is available to all through him, the Messiah.

Jesus didn't believe that God was solely located in the Temple, but that God is everywhere, in all living beings, all the time.

God is not just between these walls.

Our job is to come here, to be nourished, strengthened, so that we might go out, and spread God's love with the world.

This place needs to be one of centrifugal energy that pushes us outwards to change the world.

Not centripetal energy that sucks people in and drains them, the way that the Temple did in Jesus' time.

Physical structures are replaceable.

A Temple can be rebuilt, and it was, four times in Jerusalem.

The walls of this place can crumble and we can rebuild them.

Just talk to the Trustees, they will tell you how much work it takes to keep them standing.

But humans, not so much.

We can't be rebuilt.

When one of us gets destroyed, you can't call in the crew to clean up the lot and then get the general contractor to start over.

When someone is killed, that's it.

No reconstruction.

No raising from the dust.

So let us focus our energies not on material things, which decay and can be rebuilt.

But let's focus our energies outwards, on divine things, on people and living beings, working to help and to heal these bodies, souls, these Temples, which carry us through this life.

Let us not be centripetal forces, but centrifugal forces. Amen.