

The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany – 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

I don't watch police shows. Do real cops watch police shows? I wonder. Anyway, I googled a phrase last night and came up empty. "Techniques that a policeman uses to get a perp to comply with his commands." Maybe that was too specific. Then I tried, "arrest techniques that police use to subdue a perp" (perp is short for perpetrator – that much I do know). Still nothing. As kids, my brother was six and a half years older than me and massive. When he got my arm behind my back and raised my hand so that it was between my shoulder blades there was only one word to say: Uncle. How that word became the universal word for surrender, I do not know. But I have said "uncle" on more than one occasion. What I was looking for was some policeman move that takes the thumb and bends it a certain way that immediately forces anyone not on hallucinogenic drugs to submit. I couldn't find it. Maybe my google doesn't have high enough clearance for that kind of information.

Is it hard for you to imagine Jesus getting you in a headlock? Theologically, some of us are loathe to cry "uncle." We haven't heard about zombies from this pulpit lately, so here's a good zombie metaphor. The theological zombie looks in the mirror and tries to put the best construction on it. My lips are totally mangled, but, overall, I look pretty good. I have an eye hanging out of its socket, but hey, it is a striking color of blue. My foot is bent 'round the wrong way, my left arm is dislocated and hanging limp, and I have several gaping wounds but I saw Rob Zombie the other day and comparatively, I'm a veritable Jack LaLanne. No dude, you're a zombie, totally decrepit – theologically dead, bro.

This morning, Jesus is the big brother who lifts your arm behind your back. This morning Jesus is the policeman who twists your thumb in a direction it was never intended to go. This morning Jesus stares you in the face and makes sure that you know that, on your own, you are theologically dead. Some folks were trying to evade the accusatory function of the law. Excuses, horrible alibis, verbal misdirection – Jesus had had enough. What is worse, people were full of themselves theologically, thinking that they had kept the law, that they were abiding by what God called them to do, what God had called them to be. Have you ever looked in the mirror and thanked God that your eyes don't see so good? Oh man, I don't want to look at that! Yea, well, that's a spiritual problem and Jesus puts you in a headlock and pulls you up real close to the mirror of the Law and says: "now let's take a close look here. What do you see?"

The fifth commandment – I suspect that none of y'all have killed anyone lately. Good. But the fifth commandment doesn't end there. Anger and the foul thoughts that animate your mind when you are in a dispute, the temper that is aroused in you when someone crosses you, the seed of murder is in your heart and you know it. Cain killed his brother; fratricide. Jesus is clear. He said: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person" (Matthew 15:19-20). Guilty. You all are guilty, as am I. It is a universal indictment. But because it is universal, that does not mean that you specifically are any less in view. God can see all of us at once and only you at the same time. The law is intense. Jesus takes the self-flattering theological zombie men and makes 'em

look real hard into the mirror. You look at another woman lustfully you've broken the sixth commandment. There is only one response: Uncle! Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I give. That is the word of submission that is to flow from your mouth. Lord, have mercy on me a sinner. That is what you are. Penitent sinners are pliable in the Master's hands. He is the Holy Potter. You are the unholy clay. Hard and immovable, dry and brittle – His word comes to you, a word of truth, a word that exposes you, a word that can hurt – showing you your sin and leading you to repentance. Water is added to that hard clay. You grieve over your selfishness, your ill temper, your lust and your pride and your addiction. He wills to break you, to turn you away from all things vain, to turn to toward light and life. His commands, His ways, His statutes – that is the way of life. “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others more significant than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). That is the way of life. Choose life. “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). That is the way of life. Choose that way. “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). That is the golden way of life.

Choose life, choose grace, choose repentance, choose humility, choose to walk in His ways. Believe me, the Lord God Almighty is at work in your heart and mind to move you to do exactly that. He is coaxing you, wooing you, leading you down that beautiful road for that is where His Son is found, that is where your life in Christ comes into focus, that is where music and heaven, and light and life are in abundance. But if you insist on repeating the same old sins, if you insist on remaining hardened clay and you refuse to abandon the old life and you repeatedly commend yourself for your theological magnificence and your saintly disposition and your exceedingly minor blemishes then you will shrink and diminish and others around you will be adversely affected.

Our God will not leave us to shrink and fall away and diminish ourselves just to die in some hole. He pursues us. The Lord Christ left all that which was safe and perfect and took up our flesh. To pursue you, He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. True Man, He came to reconcile us to God, the Judge, defeating the accuser. That is Satan. Choose life, that you and your offspring may live – that is a reference to Christ. He chose life... for you. So, He renders Himself up on the altar of the cross. He allowed Satan to put Him into a death grip – nails through His hands, His feet. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good; God meant it for life. Out of the hearts of those at the cross came evil thoughts, murder, fratricide. “His blood be upon us and our children” (Matthew 27:25). “Shall I crucify your King?” “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). He paid the price, your price, to make you free, to release you from sin and guilt and death. He reconciled you to the Father. He is life. And He died on that cross. And you are forgiven. This day, you are forgiven. He secured the forgiveness you receive. He Himself gives it to you in His body and His blood. He nurtures your faith and sets you on the path that He wills us all to walk.

He takes us zombies and He makes us beautiful. Baptized in His blood, you are beautiful. Christ's radiance shines in you. His holiness is the life and light that shines in you. His resurrection shines in you. His goodness, His humility, His fidelity – He shares those priceless virtues with us. You shine. God has blessed you in His Son. He will never tire of blessing you,

giving Himself to you. He calls you to Himself. This morning, these are the words He uses to call you to Himself: “Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him, for He is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). May God’s Word work in our hearts and minds that we may fully embrace the life He gives.