

The Third Sunday in Lent – 2021

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

John 2:13-25

Is the forgiveness of sins on Craig's List? I was walking the aisles of Stater Bros. this week, looking for a can of forgiveness of sins. Couldn't find it. As a broke college student, I charted a bunch of stocks for my dad, sifting through microfiche, filling in a spreadsheet of the various stocks he was researching and, for the life of me, I don't remember the forgiveness of sins being traded on the New York Stock Exchange. Buy and sell; we are good at it. We are good at it because we do it so much. The Price Is Right; during my recent convalescence I watched this daytime favorite. I've never seen so many precise shoppers! They knew what everything cost. C'mon down! You're the next contestant on The Price Is Right. I'm not sure if it was the pain-pills I was on but I swear I heard this coming out of the television: And the first item is... the forgiveness of sins. How much does *that* go for Johnny? Well Bob, remember, the Son of God was made man, kept the law perfectly in our stead, and bore the sum total of human iniquity in His fully human flesh... and then was punished for it. Wow, Johnny, that seems like a costly price.

Librarians shush you if you are too loud in that quiet and studious environment. At the museum, there are attendants nearby to make sure that you don't touch the art. Who guards the church? One of the reasons that you are a Lutheran is because the Pope was selling the forgiveness of sins 500 years ago. In a certain sense, there would be no Lutherans if the Roman Catholic Church did not invent the idea that one could sell the forgiveness of sins. An entrepreneur is born every minute; sometimes they wear a Pope's hat. Do you think that Jesus is interested in protecting His church? Take a look at the Gospel lesson. Do you believe that it was a mere lack of decorum in the Father's House that got Jesus all riled up? Was He simply protecting good liturgical order and a proper sense of propriety – a divine Miss Manners, if you will?

He's angry. No "gentle Jesus" here. Duck your head and take three steps back because He's got a whip and He's making mayhem. Why? Why this outburst? Why this anger? Was He protecting God's holiness? If this episode were in the Catechism it might be described this way: "God's house is certainly holy in itself but we see in this episode that it should be kept holy among us also." Was it a mere abstraction that Jesus was protecting? Think! What is it that Jesus is most interested in protecting? It is you! You are at risk when God's Word is abused, maligned, distorted. You are at risk when the things of God are abused, maligned, distorted. You are at risk when the Gospel is clouded by whatever is false, whatever is worldly, whatever is empty and vain. You are at risk, and people just like you, when the glorious and true and powerful message of Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins is exchanged for something as base as buying and selling, something as base as works righteousness.

He's angry; and for good reason. The beautiful and majestic sacrificial system, an ongoing object lesson of divine grace at the Temple, had been obfuscated by those who were making a buck. What Jesus saw was just buying and selling. Lost was atonement, God's promise to pay the price Himself for man's sins. Lost was the theological jewel of the innocent substitute who would render up His life for the guilty. Lost was the awesome reality of blood, the life-blood of

the coming Christ being proleptically portrayed there at the Temple. Lost was the notion that God was present, there, at the Temple, to share His holiness. Jesus is angry because people, His people, are at risk and that the beauty of God extending Himself to save fallen humanity was obscured in the grossest way.

Ladies; you diamond wearing ladies with your beautiful rings, which your menfolk purchased to declare their love and their lives to you – when was the last time that you had it cleaned? You put lotion on your hands and some gets in the setting, on the stone, does it not? And if you dig in the garden (without gloves) and then you scour the pan and you clean out the fireplace and do all the million things that you do all the while wearing that beautiful ring. And you love that ring, right? I mean, you truly attach to it the love that you have for your husband, the value you place on your marriage. It needs cleaning from time to time. So also, the Gospel. We have an active regard for this stunningly beautiful Word, an active regard for our Holy Sacraments, an active regard for this Divine Service – and we will allow nothing to compete with its pure message, allow nothing to obfuscate the wonder of God’s salvation.

Because here’s the straight dope: the whip of cords that Jesus made... every man twists for himself/herself a brutal cord by his own sins. Truly, with the cords of our own sins all of us could be bound, hand and foot, and cast into outer darkness. Lust carries that penalty. Pride carries that penalty. Deceit carries that penalty. You happen to be guilty. The world over is guilty but you in particular. When you sin, your guilt is bound to you, all the refuse of your behavior is bound to you, the penalty that you deserve... it is all bound to you. There is no Houdini among us, none who could escape or wriggle out of God’s divine justice. Outer darkness – no reprieve, no clemency, no second chance.

And God takes your place. That is the most remarkable thing – Holy God takes *your* place. No small exchange, this – He assumes our flesh and bone and sets His face toward the cross. A cross! The lashes were multiplied on Him. He stood in your place and assumed your punishment. All blasphemy, all hatred, all pride and arrogance, all petty human jealousies and spite, all wrongheaded self-righteousness, all moral debasement, all foolish indifference – each sin from every human embedded in a lash stroke, hidden to the eye of man yet present and grievous enough to bring death, all multiplied and hideous, with barbed points penetrating the Lord of Glory.

He intended to take it all, take it away, pay the price and vanquish sin, vanquish death and set you *free*. Free from sin, free from guilt, free from death. His life blood was poured out and He wants you to see it; to know it. So, do you know what He does? He defends His church. He defends His Word. He sends Martin Luther and Saint Augustine and Athanasius and Clement of Rome and Perpetua and Felicity and countless other churchmen, churchwomen to see to it that the diamond of the Gospel is clean and its beauty set loose among the nations. He protects you – so He cleared the Temple of the moneychangers so that the sacrificial system could again be seen for what it was. He protects you – so He rendered up His life for you at Mt. Calvary. He protects you so He convicts you of your sin and drives you to the only place where the forgiveness of sins can be found – He drives you to His church. There is no buying or selling here – only grace, only divine grace, only the gracious God who loves you and gave Himself up for you.

This is a beautiful place. After Vespers this last Wednesday, I lingered in the night, roaming slowly, which is the only pace at which I move these days, around our lovely campus. This is a beautiful place. I trust that you have the same appreciation. But do you know what is exceptionally beautiful? The Ten Commandments. What is exceptionally beautiful? The pure Word of God. The beauty of the Word is an extension of the Beautiful One – the Crucified King. He is your protection in every dark and stormy gale. He gave the Temple of His body up to the nail and the spear. He took your sin and it is gone... into His corpse, His tomb. He rose in Victory on Easter and extends that victory to you now, in this life, through His Word, through His body and blood. Zeal for His house consumed Him. So said the prophet Isaiah. This is His house. Zeal for you is what brought Him into this world, led Him to the cross, and keeps Him among us. Hail, Christ our King, the power of God and the wisdom of God. To you be glory forever and ever. Amen.