

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany – 2022
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:16-30

Amnesty. Clemency. How familiar are you with those concepts? Amnesty. Clemency. Prisoners of war have focused minds; day after day after day the focus remains the same: freedom. A slave dreams of one thing: freedom. A death row inmate, genuinely guilty, knows what clemency means, and rehearses it over and over. One dying of thirst doesn't fantasize about jewelry – he just wants water. Thirst values water; dying thirst can think of nothing else. One languishing under a mountain of debt walks a troubled road. There is no freedom in debt, only worry. Carrying debt is like carrying over-packed luggage with no wheels. Carrying large debt is lugging that baggage up a downward moving escalator. There is only one thought: "When can I put this down?"

Amnesty. Clemency. Liberty. You are in need; whether or not you know it is unclear. What is clear is that God wants you to know. The joy inherent in the Gospel lesson comes to those who know what prison they have escaped, who know what slavery they have been freed from. The Lord Christ comes to His hometown, walks into the synagogue, and gives His first sermon: "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Humanity's amnesty strode into Nazareth and took up the scroll. In His voice was the year of the Lord's favor. In His flesh was the eternal year of Jubilee.

Christ the Lord had recently been baptized. After His baptism, He was led out into the desert to endure the temptations of the evil one. Fresh from wrestling with the ancient serpent, Jesus comes to His hometown. In the synagogue, the prophet Isaiah was to be read. Jubilee; the reading was all about Jubilee. In the Old Testament, God had proscribed a special year of amnesty. Every fifty years the Almighty would throw a unique celebration – not for the wealthy or the elite but for the indebted, the prisoner, the slave, those who had lost their homes. During the year of Jubilee, debts were forgiven, slaves were set free, and homes were returned to their original owners. It was a divine act of restoration! No matter how far one had fallen, Jubilee restored one's fortunes. It was the year of God's favor! Sound the trumpet; announce the arrival of amnesty, clemency, liberty. Colossal joy came to people who needed restoration.

Debt; do you know about soaring debt? Have you ever been a prisoner? Perhaps you believe every breath you have ever taken has been a breath of freedom. What do you know of slavery? Have you ever been exiled from your homeland? Not you. Let me tell you about crushing debt. Crushing debt is the middle-aged woman who cannot seem to escape the abortion she had in her youth. Crushing debt, like luggage one can never put down, is the guilt the middle-aged man feels knowing he drove his girlfriend to the clinic where a life was barbarically snuffed out. Live in that prison for a while. Or the prison of addiction, sexual addiction, alcoholic addition, it eats at our humanity, it darkens the most carefree days and it tortures the conscience. Sin, in all of its wide spectrum of manifestation, is our debt. Sin is our prison. No one has the power to release themselves. No man, no woman has the ability/wherewithal to atone for his sin, to purchase her own

release, to deliver himself from guilt. Sin binds us and takes us to Babylon, into exile, away from our homeland. Sin is a defiance of God, and you are guilty. Thirsty? Americans are dying of thirst! Selfish, Americans put their lives above others. The seed of abortion lives in you and in me. And we have legalized it, allowed it free reign. You are a person of unclean lips and you live among a people of unclean lips. In your heart can be located the kernel of hideous things. This prison of hellish captivity is not idle speculation on the part of one pastor – it is a theological reality. With St. Paul we ask: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

Amnesty. Clemency. A sinful woman threw herself at the Lord's feet; she could think of nothing else. Weeping, anointing His feet, wiping them with her hair; her sins were many. Do you think she knew it? Crushing debt, soaring guilt (she had been released, forgiven, set free). That woman tenderly displays a love born of grace, God's grace. She had been forgiven much therefore she loved much. Virtue in you, virtue in our land will come from being reacquainted with the debt we have accumulated and how that debt has been born by Christ. Amnesty! Clemency! Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. That man who beat his breast, who could not lift his eyes but simply confessed his sin, he did not fantasize about jewelry, or anything else... except forgiveness, amnesty, clemency.

Luke tells us that Jesus walked into that synagogue in Nazareth *for the purpose of* reading Isaiah 61, *in order to* read Isaiah 61. Jesus told the world that He was ushering in the ultimate Jubilee. No matter how far you have fallen, no matter how much debt, how much guilt you are burdened with, there is amnesty, clemency. Hear Him: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That is what Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah. Then He preached a short sermon: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In the synagogue, the Son of God lifted His voice and announced a Jubilee in His blood. The Liberator who would offer Himself on the cross told that assembly that His death would bring amnesty, that all those who were enslaved to sin would be set free, that we who are exiled from the Fatherland have a Savior who would prepare a place for us in heaven. The year of the Lord's favor is now; Jubilee. Christ's blood takes away your debt. There is amnesty for you, clemency. God's favor – did you hear that? He draws us back to Himself, He washes us clean by His Son's blood and we are set free.

Jubilee started with the Day of Atonement. The High Priest would take the blood of the sacrifice into the Most Holy Place and put the blood on the mercy seat, where God resided with His presence. By that act, Israel's sins were atoned for, covered, paid in full. The Lord Christ is the true content that ancient rite. He went into heaven, carrying the blood of His once-for-all sacrifice before the Father. Jesus inaugurated the year of the Lord's favor – an eternal Jubilee. That is the reality in which you live. It must not become hazy in your mind. By His suffering and death, Christ has set you free from all your sin.

We were dying of thirst and He gave us water from His pierced side. The sinful woman would do anything for Him. She knew she had been forgiven much, therefore she loved much. Jesus has taught us what to do for Him who has forgiven us so much. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." As Christ's disciples, you and I are to learn to release others of their debts; learn to forgive as you have been forgiven. Take joy in proclaiming good news to the poor. Freely you have received clemency; freely give it. Life, not death; forgiveness, not scorn. There are broken people who need your aid – Christ the Lord has freed all people from those things that dehumanize us and leave us ravaged with pain. The broken need those words of forgiveness and hope, words you possess.

The Jews who heard Him grew angry because He was not the Messiah that they had envisioned for themselves. He would welcome foreigners and Gentiles and sinners. We are His church, His body. He is all we could ever desire; He is our divine amnesty, our resurrection, our clemency and our life. He brings liberty to us in His body and blood and we, in His presence, think of nothing else.