

“Selling God on the Cheap”

3 Lent B +

Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

March 8, 2015

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this morning's message are the lessons for this day.

Every place we've lived we've found sites to take visiting family and friends. In Meriden, Connecticut we would go to Castle Craig – the highest point between the Appalachians and the ocean in New England – with a beautiful ruin of a castle keep and fields and fields of daffodils around the lake beneath in the spring. In Meridian, Mississippi our church was in the neighborhood where James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were doing canvassing for Civil Rights the day before they were murdered in a town nearby – one of the many tragedies that led to the Bloody Sunday March we remember this weekend 50 years later. It was a humbling reminder of lives laid down to end oppression & injustice.

When we lived in the Forest Park, IL we'd just have to drive over to see Paul Harvey's house in River Forest. I learned the location from the driver of a hearse during a funeral, 1025 Park Ave. Paul Harvey was famous for telling “The Rest of the Story” and one of his radio episodes told of a bank teller in Oceanside, California who had been handed a note by a man with a gun, saying, in essence, “Your money or your life!”

She began to comply but after looking at the note again her eyes flashed with anger. She reached for the drawer, pulled out the whole drawer and hit the robber over the head with it, not just once but again and again – shouting, “Shame on you!”

The police were coming, the man ran out. He was apprehended and cuffed hiding in shrubbery close by. Then the police returned to the bank and asked the teller why, one moment she was ready to hand over the cash and then went berserk. “Well,” she said, “I took another look at the note and he had written a very naughty word.” Never mind the gun or the money; it was the naughty word that pulled her trigger.

In today's Gospel, Jesus' trigger got pulled big time as He came into the courts of the House of the Lord saw the corruption carried out by the Sadducees in “*Herod's Bazaar*” and all

heaven broke loose. The Temple was surrounded by a huge plaza large enough for 100,000 people. It was divided by low barricades into various “courts” some for Jewish men, some for women and couples, and others for foreign pilgrims. The only building on the plaza was the “Temple” itself, dazzling in the Middle Eastern sun, gilt in gold and encrusted with jewels.

Surrounding the plaza was a wall, supported by columns with spaces between where Temple approved merchants sold cattle, sheep and doves. That is where Jesus saw the vendors **Selling God on the Cheap**. His violent actions, turning over their tables and letting loose the animals for sale was a side of Jesus not seen very often by the crowds who followed Him or we who follow by faith to this very day with Jesus revealed to by the Holy Spirit in the gift of faith and through our study of God’s Word as well as in the fellowship of the church.

While many pilgrims came from all over the world for the Festivals of Judaism – to learn from the great teachers, to read study and meditate, sing the Psalms and worship in the glittering temple to our One True God, the truth was the whole operation was rife with treachery. “*Herod’s Bazaar*” was given that name by the peasants because King Herod got a rake-off from the profits, as well as the Sadducees who ran the place. The Sadducees made money a number of ways. They could approve or disapprove of an animal brought for sacrifice. They seemed to find a flaw in even the most precious and perfect home raised lamb brought by a poor peasant – forcing them to buy, instead, from the Sadducees stock of animals at greatly inflated prices. The Sadducees got yet another piece of the action with the money-changers who took the Roman coins of the realm and exchanged them for Temple money at an unfair exchange rate. What was doubly dubious about their doings was that the Roman coins with the face of the Emperor/god stamped on them brought a graven image – an idol, into the very courts of the Lord’s house.

Our Old Testament lesson with the 10 Commandments reminds us that these graven images of the Emperor who fancied himself a god flew in the face of the 1st and most important Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before the One True God.” This larceny in God’s house degraded the name of God (2nd commandment) made a mockery of the worship as the sacrifices were unworthy (3rd), placed before the people leaders who were not worthy of respect (4th) and, ultimately, Jesus’ reaction to **Selling God on the Cheap** is what got Him killed (5th). The leaders of the Israelites were adulterous (in a nasty intimacy with the Romans – 6th), stole money from God’s people (7th), gave false witness against God by making false demands – not

to mention killing Jesus on trumped up charges (8th) and all this was fueled by coveting, scheming, and designing to amass all the wealth and power they could get (9& 10).

Perhaps that better explains Jesus' outburst – the Temple of the Lord should be the place where God's will and God's way is carried out as nearly as sinful humanity can not a place *Selling God on the Cheap*. In the courts of the temple there was little that reflected the words of the prophet Micah:
He (GOD) has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Balancing the business of the church with the work of the church has never been easy. We dare not point our fingers too dismissively at those corrupt Sadducees – somewhere in their hearts was what they considered a holy desire to keep the temple as it had been – talking about wanting Messiah to return, but then failing to see Jesus as God's Son because He wasn't the Messiah they wanted – the one that would return them to power, riches and recognition.

It is not just Jehovah but all of the churches and church bodies in the United States that are dealing with dwindling numbers of members, fewer fiscal resources, higher costs, and worn out, worn down church leaders and pastors. Those are "First World Church Problems," I'd say, as opposed to our Syrian, Iraqi & Egyptian brothers and sisters who are being imprisoned and laying down their very lives for being marked by the cross of Christ. Not to minimize the challenges facing us as God's people in this place – but, perhaps, to put them in perspective and to pray.

This Gospel cuts to the very center of what we are facing as Christians in the post-Christian society of the United States when, in the glitz and glimmer of the religious business of Herod's Bazaar Jesus "harnesses the power of anger in the work of love." Jesus is forcefully showing that God's house is a house of worship and prayer – worship that goes beyond the songs we sing in God's house but is lived out in word and deed, in justice, in fighting oppression and ministering in mercy.

What took place in the temple courts was less than 100 hours before the false arrest, trumped up trial and unfathomable execution of Jesus on the cross goes back to those sheep in the stalls – the sacrifice of atonement – the price that had to be paid for sin because our God is Holy & Just – God's Justice demanded a payment – a keeping of the Law – those 10

Commandments – that only Jesus could do and did. There is nothing cheap about the sacrifice of God's One and Only Begotten.

Jesus made that sacrifice so we can enter God's court with praise – worship God without fear. Did you know that the Jews never dared to utter the real name of God for fear of breaking the 2nd commandment? Now we can call upon the name of Jesus in every circumstance, pray, praise and give thanks. We don't have to take people to a special place to show them Jesus but have the honor of sharing the name, person and purpose of Jesus as God grants the opportunity! Faith in Jesus makes us bold to pray as we did this morning, that God who called us to live faithfully and act courageously, will keep us steadfast in the utter foolishness of His grace, purchased by the cross and guaranteed by an empty grave. Amen.

Now may our gracious God teach us the wisdom that comes only from Jesus, His Son, and our brother! Amen.