

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent, March 3, 2024**

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

Pastor Chris Repp

Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

All three of our readings this morning touch upon the nature of our relationship with God and how it connects with our relationship to one another. Because those two relationships are meant to go together. It's a package deal. But that doesn't stop us from trying to separate our relationship with God from how we treat one another. For most of our recent history in this country, with notable exceptions perhaps back in the 1950s and whatever is happening at the moment, faith has generally been regarded as a private matter, something between the individual and God. And that's because we were created out of a religiously diverse group of people. In order to live together, we had to keep the state out of religion, and religion out of the state. The reality of the early colonies, however, is that a number of them were run by people who escaped religious intolerance in their country of origin, only then to turn around and practice it against their fellow citizens, with no toleration for dissent. That's why, when the constitution was written, the founders made sure that states wouldn't be able to do this to their citizens any more by legally separating church and state. I think that is a good thing. Where faith crops up these days in the public sphere it tends to be distorted and conflated with other agendas. But with this necessary segregation of church and state comes a tendency disconnect our relationship with God from the rest of our lives. And that, I think, is a problem.

I want to look quickly at the readings in front of us this morning to see how they build a picture of how God intends to relate to us, and by this relationship to lead us into an authentic way of life that reaches up to God in faith and out to others in loving, concrete action.

Read in isolation like we have just done, this account of Jesus "cleansing the temple" can seem shocking and disturbing. (Isn't Jesus supposed to be nice?) There's a lot going on here that we don't have time to get into, but I want to focus on just two things. First, Jesus tells the people to stop making his Father's house a market place. Now there are good reasons for both selling animals and changing money on the temple grounds, so Jesus is not necessarily objecting to those practices as such. What he is objecting to, I think, is that the system has become corrupt, obscuring the nature of the relationship with God that this is supposed to be about, and taking advantage of the needy. Singling out the sellers of doves here might be a hint in that direction, because doves were what the poorest of the poor, who couldn't afford anything else, brought or bought to sacrifice. The poor were being taken advantage of here in the pious exchange of idolatrous Roman coins for the temple currency needed to purchase the sacrificial offerings. And it wasn't a big step from treating the poor in a transactional way to treating God in a transactional way, as if they were buying God's favor: here is my ox, or my sheep, or my dove. Be kind to me. Bless me. Make me healthy and successful. We still treat God this way, don't we? Haven't you bargained with God? "Do this thing for me, God, get me out of this jam, save my loved one, and I'll be the best Christian ever." Some preachers of the so-called "prosperity gospel" are pretty crass about exploiting this instinct of ours. Invest your faith in God, and of course your offerings, and God will bless you with a prosperous life. What Jesus is getting at here in this dramatic and startling act is that God is looking for different kinds of relationships all around, more intimate, authentic relationships based on love and trust. This is reinforced by the second thing I want us to notice in this reading, namely Jesus' enigmatic statement about destroying and rebuilding the temple, and John's explanation of what he meant by the "temple of his body." The point John is making here is that Jesus has become the new way of relating to God after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Buildings can be destroyed, but Jesus

cannot. His death leads to resurrection, and so in him there is a permanent, unbreakable connection to God.

Our first reading also gets at the authenticity of relationship that God is looking for. This about the covenant God made with the people of Israel after their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Have you ever noticed, though, that the details of the Ten Commandments as laid out here have more to do with our relationship to other people than they do about our direct relationship to God? There is a long tradition in the church of separating the commandments into two tables, the first having to do with God and the second having to do with our neighbor. Martin Luther reflects this division in his Catechisms when talks about the Sabbath in terms of not neglecting God's word. But that is based on other versions of the commandments found elsewhere in the Bible. What we have today seems more concerned about people than about God. It is about making sure that *everyone* rests, including servants and children, including animals, even, and migrant workers. It is, in a way, about equal justice for all. Even the second commandment about not misusing God's name, is not just a matter between us and God. God's name was invoked in deals with other people. Oaths were sworn and promises made using God's name. Unlike God, we don't always keep our promises, and sometime we never intend to keep them in the first place, even as we swear upon God's name. The second commandment, then, is at least in part God saying, "don't include me in your dishonest arrangements." I think I even want to see in the first commandment implications for how we relate to one another. Luther famously wrote in his Large Catechism that whatever we place our ultimate trust in, that is our god. If our ultimate trust is in anyone or anything besides the one who calls us also to love our neighbors, then our attention and concern will be drawn away not only from the true God, but also from others and toward ourselves. And that will be destructive of human society.

All of this is pulled together in our second reading from 1 Corinthians. "[Judeans] demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom," but we proclaim the foolishness of a crucified Messiah. Signs and wisdom are each, in their own way, about trying to control our relationship with God, and we love them both dearly. Maybe you had your own sign from God that compelled you to come to faith, or to rekindle the faith of your childhood, some extraordinary experience that made you certain of God's presence in your life. Or maybe you've been convinced by reasoned arguments that seem to prove God's existence and the truth of the scriptures. Church history is full of both of these approaches, and both of them have their place. Paul will argue elsewhere that these approaches prepared the Jewish and Gentile peoples be able to know God as God wants to be known, namely as the one who literally loves us to death. How foolish is that? If you have ever been in love, you know how foolish love can be. It's why your friends tease you. It makes you irrational. And in some important sense you lose a measure of control over yourself and of the relationship, and your life revolves around your beloved. When your love is requited, it's the best thing in the world. When it isn't, it is devastating. And you cannot control that.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is by such foolish love that God is redeeming and restoring the whole creation, starting with you. But also with me. And with the person next to you and across your street and on the other side of the world. This is not the *quid-pro-quo* relationship of the market place that made Jesus so angry. This is a relationship that claims our whole being and give us, in Jesus, God's whole being as well. But it is also a relationship that draws us into authentic connection with one another, and with all those whom God also so foolishly loves. Think on that as you come to receive the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion this morning. God gives godself to us wholly and unreservedly, so that we might give ourselves to God and to the world God has so deeply loved in Jesus Christ. May that good news empower our lives, may its foolish love capture our hearts, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.