**Preaching Notes Lent 3.B.2015**

**Exodus 20:1-17**

Part of our Lenten reflection, as discussed last week, has to do with how we are living out our side of the covenant with God. Certainly for our predecessors in the faith, the children of Israel, keeping the Ten Commandments given to the people by God through Moses was a critical part of the covenant.

I know a fair number of Christians who love to quote Matthew 5:17 and say that Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, and suggest that because of Jesus, the laws and commandments in the Old Testament no longer apply to them because the New Testament is what really matters. To these folks I say, “Hogwash.”

Jesus did not come to abolish the law entirely. He came to help us live it more deeply and more fully. He came to help us live as disciples who are interested not just in keeping score, but in transforming the whole world into the kingdom of God.

It is important that our members know the Ten Commandments and other critical teachings from our Jewish heritage. Only when we know and follow the commandments of God are we able to keep up our end of the bargain we make with God when we enter into a covenant relationship.

As I have said on previous occasions when this text came up, I think that the Ten Commandments deserve more attention than one sermon can accomplish. While you might read them as part of your liturgy this day (for ideas on how to do this click here <http://www.gbod.org/resources/the-ten-commandments>, consider setting aside a period of weeks, perhaps during Ordinary Time (after Pentecost), so that you may give more attention to this important topic.

For ideas on developing a sermon series on the Ten Commandments click on the links below.

<http://www.gbod.org/resources/preaching-the-ten-commandments> (Thanks to Rev. Susan Daniel-Brey from Emporia, Kansas, for her contribution!)

<http://www.gbod.org/resources/pastors-read-the-ten-commandments-how-our-most-ancient-moral-text-can-renew>

(Note that this leads to one-hour archived webinar on the book, *The Ten Commandments: How our Most Ancient Moral Text can Renew Modern Life*, by David Harzony.)

**I Corinthians 1:18-25**

Just like in the time of Jesus, we live in a world in which many people make judgments based on what is presented on the outside:

* How physically attractive we are—how beautiful, able-bodied, and fit,
* Where we live,
* What kind of car we drive,
* How much money we make,
* Our educational and professional achievements, and
* How well we comply with what the culture considers normative.

This, my friends, is the wisdom of the world in which we live.

So what does it mean for us to say, along with Paul, that instead of this worldly vision of success, we proclaim “Christ crucified?” What does it mean to hold up this symbol as our standard of a life well-lived, our standard of “success,” our standard of beauty. What does it mean that we measure our lives by a symbol that represents a convicted criminal hanging on a cross and bleeding to death?

Recently I had a conversation with a group of people about the role of Jesus’ death in our salvation. I asked these Methodist Christians a point-blank question: “How does Jesus dying on the cross save you?”

The people in the group had a hard time finding an answer. Several mentioned that Jesus had to die in order for resurrection to occur, and that their salvation wasn’t really about his death, but his ability to overcome death. I thought that was a fair response but it still didn’t get at the question of why Jesus had to suffer and die in such a publicly humiliating way in order that I, personally, might have eternal life.

I have been to seminary and so I know that there are many theories of atonement. I will briefly mention the top-five here:

* There is the **Ransom Theory**. This theory teaches that the death of Christ was a ransom sacrifice, usually said to have been paid to Satan, but in some views paid to God the Father, in satisfaction for the bondage and debt on the souls of humanity as a result of inherited sin.
* The **Moral Influence Theory** suggests that the purpose and result of Christ’s death was to influence mankind toward moral improvement. This theory denies that Christ died to satisfy any principle of divine justice, but teaches instead that his death was designed to greatly impress humankind with a sense of God’s love, resulting in softening their hearts and leading them to repentance and right action.
* The **Governmental Theory** says that although there is no necessary payment for sin, the cross demonstrates God’s justice when the law is broken in order to persuade us to turn from our sin. Christ’s suffering was a real and meaningful substitute for the punishment humans deserve, but it did not consist of Christ receiving the exact punishment due to sinful people. Instead, God publicly demonstrated God’s displeasure with sin through the suffering of God’s own sinless and obedient Son as a propitiation. Christ’s suffering and death served as a substitute for the punishment humans might have received.
* The **Satisfaction Theory** holds that the cross satisfies the honor of God through the sacrifice of the Son of God. The satisfaction due to God was greater than what all created beings are capable of doing so God had to make satisfaction.
* And finally, there is the ever-popular **Penal Substitution Theory**, whereby Christ died on the cross as a substitute for sinners. God imputed the guilt of our sins to Christ, and he, in our place, bore the punishment that we deserve.

Why did Jesus have to die on the cross in order to save you? It isn’t an easy question to answer, and I would venture to guess that just as in the group with whom I was discussing this question, many people in the congregation you serve might also have difficulty. It is not our job as pastors to tell people precisely how proclaiming Christ crucified saves them. It is our job to help them to consider very seriously what it means to say that Jesus died for our sins or Jesus died for our salvation, and what that means for the way that they live their lives.

One thing seems for certain, though: proclaiming Christ crucified is not simply a “party-line” to be recited by those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ. It is a radical statement to point to the cross and say that THIS, Christ on the cross dying, is my hope and my salvation, my source of true happiness and satisfaction in life.

Because saying those words is also implying the opposite: proclaiming Christ crucified is saying that looking a certain way, living a certain way, achieving a certain standard of living, is NOT my hope and my salvation, or my source of true happiness and satisfaction in life.

In other words, to proclaim Christ crucified is to boldly and blatantly reject the primary values of the culture in which I live.

As we consider our call to “observe a holy Lent: by self–examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self–denial; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word,” surely as part of the season’s discipline we must not only seriously wrestle with what it means for each one of us, personally, to proclaim Christ crucified, but also consider how we are making that evident in our daily living.

**John 2:13-22**

In today’s scripture lesson from the Gospel of John we have the story of Jesus going up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place this event as occurring towards the end of Jesus ministry, but John has it happening near the beginning. Whenever it was that this happened, the story is pretty much the same in all the gospels.

Jesus goes to the temple where he finds all of these religious entrepreneurs taking advantage of this Jewish high holy day to try and make a little profit for themselves. He sees the folks selling animals for sacrifice—sheep, cattle, doves— to the pilgrims who have come to Jerusalem. And this makes him angry because he knows that these people who have come all this way for the Passover probably don’t have a ton of money. They’ve already spent all their money just to make the trip to Jerusalem!

But they need the animals for the sacrificial slaughter in the Passover ritual. And since they couldn’t bring animals from home for this —can you imagine all those people making their way across the desert towards Jerusalem having to drive a cow or a sheep or bring along a dove ? —since they obviously couldn’t do that, what had happened is the local folks saw a big business opportunity in the Passover. They sold the cows and the sheep and the doves to the pilgrims for an inflated price and made a tidy profit.

They saw a business opportunity and they took it. There was a market and a need for a product, and so they seized the moment. Over time it had grown into a big business, not only for the sellers, but for the temple itself.

We all know how this works. The people who provide the cattle and sheep and doves charge a price per head. Nothing too big at first. Just what the market will bear.

And then the temple decides they ought to get a cut, so they charge $25 for each booth that they can rent to the animal brokers so they can make a little profit as well. And of course, that fee was just added to the cost of the animal. So what if it costs the pilgrims a couple of bucks more. That’s the price of convenience, right? That’s the way capitalism works! It’s a GOOD thing.

And maybe the priests then ask for $5 each for allowing the animal brokers to use the temple. They should get a cut, right? After all, if they weren’t there to run things the pilgrims would never have come in the first place.

And then the Jewish Women’s group decides that this would be a good opportunity to raise some cash for missions. And the trustees think, yeah, if everybody else is getting in on the deal we should too, after all it takes money to keep this building up and running, the lights and heat on.

And it’s not like it is illegal. There are no government regulations against doing this. There aren’t even any religious regulations! It’s just good business! You see a potential market and why would you not take advantage of the opportunity, right? I mean, it would almost be a bigger sin not to!

And so the money-changers saw the livestock brokers making a profit and they thought, well there’s an opportunity here for us too! And on and on it went until the whole Passover event had become the most profitable week of the year for the Temple and its brokers. The moneychangers came up with all kinds of deals to entice the pilgrims to buy. They offered instant credit approval, no interest the first year, no payments for six months. The Temple was turned into a thriving market. And each year it got a little more expensive for the pilgrims; after all, in good business you have to maximize your earnings, right? How can you know fully what the market will bear if you don’t test it out?

So this is what had been going on for years and years. It wasn’t against the law, and it seems like no one had really questioned the morality of it. It was just a way of life in ancient Jerusalem.

Until Jesus came along. Jesus arrived on the scene and he saw that the pilgrims really didn’t have a choice anymore. If they wanted to participate in the Passover rituals they just had to suck it up and pay the price. And Jesus didn’t think this was fair. He questioned the practice in a BIG way. Made quite a scene there in the temple, right there in front of God and everyone!

What did he do? Well, he threw open the doors of the booths and drove the animals out with a whip. He pushed over the tables and poured out the coins of the money- changers. He yelled at the top of his lungs, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house into a marketplace!”

It was a wake-up call to the entire Temple.

And we get this, don’t we? I mean, we GET IT. Don’t you just wish Jesus had come along a couple of years ago to the United States and given us a big wake-up call before our economy went down the toilet?

Oh, but, wait! He did come along, didn’t he? He’s been here all along! I mean, this story is right here in the Bible in black and white, in all four Gospels. We’ve had access to it all these years. We’ve heard this story a million times before. Maybe it just takes a crisis to finally open our ears to being able to hear his words in a new way and allow them to be a wake-up call not just for our churches, but for our entire nation.

Because turning our temples, turning ourselves, turning our communities, turning our entire world, into a marketplace, it seems to me is not necessarily a good thing. It is not illegal. But maybe there are some morality questions that we need to address. Because turning everything into a marketplace can be problematic, especially when it comes at such a high price to the majority of ordinary, good, hard-working, honest people.

The good news is that we have been given a wake-up call! God has given us an opportunity to hear the Word and repent and believe in the good news of Jesus Christ! God has given us another chance to be disciples!

And it IS Good News! We can turn around. We can change our lives. We can stop turning God’s house into a marketplace and focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

All we’ve got to do is look out our doors and see the world around us not with the eyes of marketers looking for a way to sell our programs and draw the biggest crowds and the most customers. No, no, no. We’ve got to look out our doors with God’s eyes, not our own.

We’ve got to look around our churches and our neighborhoods and see the real needs of God’s people: the wounds, the hurts, the anger, the depression, the addiction, the fear, the suffering, the oppression, the cries for healing and meaning and a real sense of purpose in this short life that we’ve been given.

We can’t be about the business of just getting the most people we can to simply walk through our doors and sit down in our seats; we’ve got bigger fish to fry! We’ve got to be about the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ who are not only interested in being fed themselves, but who are also interested in feeding others.