

4 March 2018
The Third Sunday in Lent

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Living Cleansed and Free”

Text: Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

My wife received a couple of porcelain tea cups for her birthday. What if she took them out to our backyard and began jumping on them? What would you think? She’s crazy, right? So you ask her - why did she do that? Oh, she says, I thought they were trampolines.

Or another gift she received was a nice wooden picture, hand-painted by her brother and sister-in-law. What if she put it in the oven and began to cook it, and then served it for dinner? Crazy again, right? And so you ask her - why did she do that? Oh, she says, I thought it was a steak.

Those are silly stories, right? But it is what folks do with the Commandments. They take them and misuse them. They misuse them when they read them and think: *I have to do these things in order to be saved*. But that’s just as crazy as my wife jumping on her tea cups or serving a wooden picture for dinner - that’s not what they’re for. That’s taking something good and using it wrongly. For the Law, the Commandments, are good, but not if used wrongly. Not if we think that God spoke these words for us to save ourselves.

Because here’s the thing: God had *already* saved His people! For what does He say before speaking these words to the people? ***I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*** Or in other words, I am the God who saved you! He didn’t give them these commandments and *then* say: Do this, or do them good enough, and then I’ll rescue you and bring you out of your slavery. Prove yourself. No. He acted first. He rescued them first. He loved them first. And *then* He spoke these words of instruction. To teach the people. This is how free people live. And you are now free. Free to serve. Free to love.

For the Commandments, Jesus would later explain, are all about love. They are what love looks like. If you could love perfectly, you would live like this. You would love God and your neighbor in this way. You would serve them, protect them, help them, honor them. Not to save yourself, but because you have already been saved and are free, now, to love in this way.

And really, it's a beautiful picture, and our world would be a really beautiful place if everyone did these things.

If there were no other gods but the one true God. No thing or no one else in this world that we feared, loved, or trusted more than Him.

If we rejoiced in having His Name given to us by having it on our lips at all times, calling on Him in every need, praying, praising, giving thanks.

If everyone in this world rejoiced in His Word and rejoiced in hearing it and learning it.

If all fathers and mothers, and all authorities, were honored, served, obeyed, loved, and cherished. And all authorities carried out their responsibilities according to God's Word and will.

If there were no murder, no hate, no anger, no rage, no shootings, no bombings, no abortion, no suicide (assisted or otherwise), no mercy killing, no chewing up our neighbor with our words, no neglecting anyone in his or her need, but helping them and providing what they need.

If all sexuality was between a husband and wife, in the joy of marriage, and all marriages were godly marriages, and there were no unnatural relations, no abuses, no rapes, no one night stands, no pornography.

If we helped our neighbor keep what he has and didn't try to take for ourselves, and were generous with all.

If we always told the truth, always tried to speak the best of others, and never gossiped, betrayed, or slandered.

If we were content with what God has given us and didn't see this life as a competition between ourselves and others. That we don't have to keep up with the Joneses, because we have a Father in heaven who is caring for us and providing for us. A Father in heaven who has rescued us from our slavery and bondage, and if He did that, to believe that He will also provide us with all that we need for this life that He has given us. What a wonderful world it would be . . .

So what these Commandments show us, then, is how we've fallen short. How we have contributed to making our world, our lives, and the lives of others not so wonderful. How we've not lived in the freedom God has given us.

The people of Israel had this problem, too. You can take the man and woman out of Egypt, but it's another thing to take the Egypt out of the man and woman. And so God

had rescued them and freed them and said this is how free persons live . . . but then when faced with a little adversity, the old Egyptian in them popped right back out again. They built a golden calf. They wanted to go back to Egypt, back into slavery. They didn't rejoice in God, they grumbled against Him.

You, too? Yeah, us too. That old Egyptian, that old sinner, that old Adam, that old us keeps popping back up and out of our hearts. We hear these commandments, we hear these words, and agree with them - this would be a pretty awesome world if we did these things. Maybe we even resolve to do better! And then . . .

And then you realize, these Commandments don't make us better, don't improve us. They show us that we're not. That Egypt is still in our hearts, luring us back, pulling us down . . .

And if you see that, that's good. For that's one of the reasons why God spoke these words. They not only show us what a life of freedom looks like, what a life of love looks like, God also spoke these words to show us that old Egyptian in us, and that if we think we can do these things to save ourselves or make us worthy of God, then we're just jumping on tea cups or eating wood.

So yeah, you can take us out of Egypt, but can you take the Egypt out of us?

Well, you and I? No. We can't. But there is one who can. Only one.

And we got a picture of Him today. Jesus goes to the Temple in Jerusalem and cleans it out. He makes a whip of cords, drives out the money changers, and overturns their tables. His Father's house had become a house of trade - and not just the buying and selling of livestock and the exchanging of money, but how this all reflected on God Himself. That our relationship with Him was a transaction, an effort to win His favor. No! This was not how free people live! This is not how children of God live! Children don't come into their father's house to win his favor - they already have that! Think of how the father reacted to the return of his prodigal son (Luke 15). No, children come because this is their father's house, and their father wants them here. Because this is the place of love and forgiveness, freely given.

The Jews didn't understand that any more, and so they asked Jesus, ***What sign do you show us for doing these things?*** Well, Jesus says, He would show them the Father's love and forgiveness, freely given. He would show them by doing what their Father sent Him to do for them - lay down His life for them on the cross, and then in three days raise it up again. For Jesus not only came to cleanse the Temple, but even more, to cleanse the Temple of our hearts. To take the Egypt out of us, out of our hearts, that He dwell there, and He alone.

And so Jesus cleansing the Temple gives us a visual of what He has come to do for us, in our hearts, to cleanse us.

For that it would also take a whip of cords, but not brought down on us, but upon Him, on His back. He lashed for us.

He would overturn the tables in our hearts - all our false gods, our idols, those things we fear, love, and trust more than Him, and drive them out.

And not the wood of tables but the wood of the cross He would *set up* in our hearts, that not the blood of sheep or oxen, but that one sacrifice that no money in the world could ever buy - the Lamb of God - shed His blood for us. His blood to wash away our sin and cleanse our hearts and minds and our whole lives.

And how do we know? How do we know that He has done it? Because on that third day His tomb was empty. On the third day He did it; He did what He said He would. He raised up His Body, which was the Temple of God - the place where God was now dwelling with man. A living Saviour, not a dead one, showing you and giving to you the love and forgiveness of God. There, that is what love looks like. There, that is your forgiveness. There, that is your freedom to live.

That's why Paul said today that *Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified*. Because not signs or wisdom or effort can do it - only Christ crucified. Only the Lamb of God. Only Jesus can do both - take us out of Egypt and the Egypt out of us. He is, Paul continues, *our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption*. And so, he says, *let the one who boasts* boast not that he can do it, that she can keep them commandments, that he is good, that she is worthy - let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

So how do we do that? Boast in the Lord? Acknowledge His greatness and faithfulness and power? Well, by bringing our children to be baptized. By repenting of our sins and receiving His forgiveness. By coming to His Table *set up* here for you, and eating His Body and drinking His Blood. By coming to hear His Word, gladly hearing and learning it. In all those ways we are boasting in the Lord, for we are showing that He is here, that He is here for us, and confessing what kind of a God and Saviour He is - one who loves and forgives His children. One who wants us here and welcomes us back, always.

And thus loved and forgiven, set free again, we leave this place and live in the freedom He has given us. Freely serving, freely loving, our family, our friends, our neighbors, all people, in all the places we go; all the places God puts us. That may not change the world, but it might change a life. When we love, when we serve, when we forgive, when we give, when we help, when we speak, when we are generous, when we are kind. When we live the new life we have been given, set free from Egypt, and knowing that we are on

our way to the Promised Land.

So we'll *drink* out of the tea cups (and out of His cup!), and we'll *hang* the picture (and His cross!) on the wall, we'll honor marriage and speak well of others, we'll protect life and not cling to the things of this world, we'll speak God's Name and His Word will not just inform us but form us. And more.

And if others think we're crazy, that's okay. They thought Jesus was too. But living in His freedom and loving and serving hurts a lot less than jumping on tea cups, and tastes a lot better than wood.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.