

**MARCH 7, 2021**

In the small catechism Martin Luther addresses confession, and when asked about what sins we should confess, he says we should examine our lives in light of the Ten Commandments; which is of course our Old Testament reading today.

When I was looking over the commandments this past week, I did see myself reflected in that mirror. Particularly in light of the ninth and tenth commandments—Thou shalt not covet...

We're all affected by covetousness. It's all about wants and desires-- I want this and I want that... I want my political party, my candidates, my issues... And when our wants and desires are in conflict with others, we become rivals... Our politics are full of it these days...

And if there's a lot of tension in the community, somebody might even make an accusation. The bible calls it the pointing of the finger "we'd all be better off if we got rid of that person..." My goodness, these days there are news channels devoted to the pointing of the finger. And people are addicted to these shows. You get the picture, covetousness leading to rivalry, leading to violence, and we are in bondage to it...

This brings us to our Gospel lesson: the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. This story appears in all four gospels. In the synoptic gospels, Matthew Mark and Luke, the story appears near the end, in the context of Passion Week. Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey, to shouts of Hosanna which means save us; he goes to the Temple and overturns the tables.

The gospel of John treats this story in a significantly different way. First of all, there's a set-up... In Chapter one, John the Baptist, sees Jesus, and on two different occasions, he says, Behold the Lamb of God. Behold the Lamb of God.

This is not a cute or quaint title. John is directly connecting Jesus to the sacrificial animals being killed in the Temple. He is saying that Jesus will be a sacrifice, like those lambs in the Temple are being sacrificed.

Also, John puts this story, front and center; in chapter two; immediately after the wedding at Cana. John tells this story early. Right away... In other words, John may be suggesting this story provides a key to understand the ministry of Jesus.

John's version of the story also emphasizes that Jesus drove the sacrificial animals out of the Temple. He made a whip and passionately drove the animals out. He even instructed the people selling the doves, to "take them out of here." Jesus sets the sacrificial animals free. This is significant.

When Jesus overturns the tables and sets the animals free, Jesus is overturning thousands of years of sacrificial practice. Jesus is literally turning the whole world upside down.

Jesus did become a sacrificial victim; he did in fact become the Lamb of God. The religious people in the Temple were jealous of him, they pointed their fingers at him, suggested they would all be better off if they got rid of him... And sure enough, that's what they did.

They were convinced God was on their side. But God turned the tables on them and raised Jesus from the dead; and by doing that, we now see things differently. God is not in the finger-pointing sacrificial violence, God is on the side of the victim. As Paul said in our epistle lesson today, “The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Quick story... I remember the day Martin Luther King was assassinated. Growing up on a farm in the middle of Minnesota, I had absolutely no idea what had happened. I remember my Dad picking me after a school activity, the car radio was on, and he was quiet. The radio kept repeating and repeating, Martin Luther King had been shot and was killed. It was April of '68, I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

I knew something bad had happened, but I didn't know why it was such a big deal. School the next day was a huge learning experience. I'm so thankful for teachers who can make complex issues understandable. Mrs. Nelson was a good teacher.

I came to understand that Martin Luther King was a pastor who was a black man and advocated for people like himself. And some people didn't like him for doing that. Some people hated him so much, they thought they would be better off if they killed him. And that's what happened.

It was such a simple explanation, but in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade mind, it stuck... I think it was the first time I ever realized there were people of different color. The first time I ever understood there could be so much hatred between people, that some were willing to kill over it. In my 4<sup>th</sup> grade mind, the world suddenly seemed like a more dangerous place.

Have you ever had people point their finger at you? Have you ever been a Democrat in a conversation with a lot of Republicans? Have you ever been a Republican in a conversation with a lot of Democrats? Have you been ridiculed, marginalized, or bullied? Sin causes all kinds of death and destruction...

Because of sin, we live as sacrificial lambs held in the throes of a covetous system that is literally killing us. And Jesus comes to us; he knows firsthand the depth of this suffering and sin.

And as Jesus is raised from the dead, Jesus lifts us up as well. The good news is that we set free and saved from sacrifice. He forgives us unconditionally; he gives us a mirror so we can see ourselves, so we can confess our sin, be reconciled to one another, and be a new creation. And because we are a new creation, we can reach out to love and serve others.

And in this way, coveting and desiring becomes transformed. Coveting to have things our way is replaced with the desire to follow Jesus, to be like Christ.

This is what God does... This is what baptismal life is all about... And all we can say, is thanks be to God... Amen