

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Third Sunday in Lent: March 7, 2021

“Salvation and Stewardship”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good Morning everyone, as we continue our Lenten journey. Today's scripture has many layers and contains many good sermons. I have chosen to talk about salvation today because as we keep in mind the season of Lent, and we add good things to our lives – or we repent and change the bad things in our lives, we really should know the true basis for doing so. We need to look a little more closely at what being a follower of Jesus really means.

How many of you are uncomfortable with the image of the good shepherd turning over tables in anger? Does this make Jesus bi-polar? Having a bad day? And the ultimate question that can be suppressed in the back of your mind: if Jesus can get angry and turn over tables, will he be angry at me for maybe wanting something material or bringing (or not bringing) money to church. Lastly, if Jesus is offended by having money in the church, what does that mean for stewardship, and that is where we will go today.

Interestingly enough, when Jesus was approached on the subject of money and taxes and paying the Emperor, he made a simple statement. "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's". He may have said it loudly and demandingly. It could have just been a statement, or maybe served with a sarcastic turn. But the response isn't angry, violent, or even a bit upset. Yes, Jesus is talking about money without too much of a care.

Then we have the turning of the tables at the temple, which (bottom line) is about money. So is Jesus bi-polar? Are we going to pick the shepherd, lamb of God over this angry prophet? But wait, we are still talking money, what happened.

What happened? What happened is that Jesus is not upset about the money. The bottom line is salvation. Salvation. Right relationship to God.

During Biblical times a guilt offering (to make right your relationship with God) was a young ram, as perfect in physical condition as possible. This offering also compensated those affected by your transgression. The priest killed the ram and divided up the meat among God's burnt offering, a priestly commission, and then the family and or the community receiving the leftovers. The sinner is then expected to make good the debt caused by their transgression.

For a sin offering the requirement was a bull. However if you were poor, you could get by with two doves.

This isn't about money, but about the price of salvation. Making a profit on God. These people had put a price on the relief that is brought by outwardly showing their repentance and formally asking forgiveness in order to regain a right relationship with God. These vendors were making a living and even profiting from a person's sin.

As a priest, the one ordained to give absolution and guide one through the Rite of Reconciliation, you have to know that it is not about me, the Bishop, or anyone else. It is about God working in your life. It is about you turning toward God, rather than away. There is no price tag for that. There is no price tag for being in right relationship with God. The money, as Jesus said earlier, belongs to the world, but your heart is what is important to God.

That is not to say that at times a priest may request further actions not limited to prayer for compensation for harm to others. But ultimately, the moment of release and relief are in the hands of God and you. This is why Lent calls us to review our lives and because we are a work in progress - right all our relationships.

Interestingly enough Jesus refers to the destruction of the Temple. This is both figuratively as his body, but was possibly meant literally as well, a foretelling; since the destruction of the Temple came shortly after his death. As Jesus took on the ultimate giving of his life – he became that ram, those doves. He literally leveled the playing field. Money or lack of it, couldn't keep you from right relationship with God.

Prayer in Jesus' name, repentance, learning right relationship with God through his teachings and acting upon those teachings, means any and all the ways that you need to make your relationship with God right - are at the tip of your tongue. In the name of Jesus. No money required.

Yet the reference to the Temple is also warranted. The destruction of the Temple in 70 CE forced all animal sacrifice to be stopped and replaced with prayer and alms, with songs of forgiveness, and outward reconciliation.

Unfortunately, as years passed on, the Christian tradition found ways to replicate the idea of purchasing salvation in many ways. With everything from indulgences to televangelists, we followers of Jesus have at times become those very sellers and merchants at the Temple. We need to be aware of what we think we are doing when we participate in church.

I am proud that we are a community small in size but big in heart. For those of you who were able to read a little of the report in the E-news about what Christ the Lord has done this past year, you know we did a lot. This is the stewardship of Jesus. The work we have done has offered our money, but more importantly our hearts to the Lord.

As we move forward, and maybe when the world opens up again, we will have the ability to plan more events, have fundraisers, and yes, request money. But make no

mistake, we are not the sellers at the Temple tables and you all made that very clear this past and very strange year of 2020.

As constricted as we have been, your money and donations have fed the hungry, clothed the poor, and housed the homeless. You have given away books for those stuck at home to share, you have provided masks and supplies for masks to people whose names you will never know. How many lives have been saved by you? You – the community of Christ the Lord.

If Jesus walked into our sanctuary what would he see? Are we preventing anyone from feeling loved by God? Are we in anyway a stumbling block to the love of Christ? This is what is at the heart of today's Gospel.

Are we using our Christ the Lord funds to help people have right relationship with God, which starts with some comfort and care? I say we are.

If Jesus walked into our sanctuary – maybe he would volunteer to man a table at the plant sale, or even at Animal Fest – because those funds help us help others.

If that angry picture of Jesus upsets you, good! Keep that in mind, anytime you are considering donating. Make sure the funds go to the right place within the organization itself. Make sure where you are putting your money is a place that fosters right relationship with God.

Christ died for us, he paid the ultimate price – his life. Eventually we too will pay the ultimate price of living in an earthly body. But we know, in the name of our savior Jesus Christ, our relationship with God is a work in progress. But it is good, and we are blessed, here, now, and forever. Amen