

Text: Ezekiel 33:7-20, Luke 13:1-9

 Oculi (3rd Sunday in Lent)

The Lord's Business

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned before the service, this Sunday, the third in Lent, is traditionally called "Oculi", which is Latin for "my eyes". It's taken from the psalm verse that says, "My eyes are ever on the Lord, because only he can deliver me." It's a reminder that we ought to be looking to the Lord and to the Lord alone for salvation – and indeed for all good things. And it's a necessary reminder because in our fallen state, the tendency is for us to look to everything *but* to the Lord. It's as if we are blind to the simple truth that our hope and trust ought to remain always only in him.

This idea is reinforced by the traditional Gospel reading for today, which is the story of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. In his incapacity to see even from birth, this man represents all of us. Because of sin we are all born spiritually blind. It's like Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." The things of the Spirit, the truths of God – not one of us can properly see or understand them until such time as we are spiritually enlightened. And even then, this enlightenment comes by degrees; we don't see everything all at once. It's only as we continue in God's Word and rely on his Spirit that more becomes clear over time.

And it's here that we can sometimes be led astray, because even before we are spiritually enlightened, we still *imagine* that we can see and understand the things of God. We *think* we get it. We think we know how the Lord operates in the world. That's the problem Nicodemus had. He was a Bible scholar. He thought he knew it all. And this is why Jesus was such a puzzle to him. The miracles Jesus did, proved that he was from God, and yet the message Jesus taught was completely different than what Nicodemus expected to hear from a man of God. The two weren't matching up. Jesus had to tell Nicodemus that his confusion was due his spiritual blindness. You think you see how the Lord works. You think you understand the Lord's way of doing business; but you don't.

Sadly, Nicodemus is not the only person to suffer from this problem. We all do to varying degrees – even we who have been enlightened and come to faith in Christ. The problem is that we still have a sin nature, and on account of it, we're still partially blind. The result is that in some ways we see true and right, and in other ways we only think we see true. And what this can lead to is an unholy mixture in the Church in which we do some things according to the Lord's way of doing business, and other things according to a worldly way of doing business without being aware of our error. But it's always a mistake to use worldly solutions to spiritual problems.

A good example is the way some churches try to attract new members by using modern marketing techniques. Make no mistake: the goal is good. We want people to come to faith in Christ. But according to such strategies, the most important thing is to give the customer what he wants. You've got to find that special niche that will make people feel that you're the right church for them. And so, as I've mentioned before, some places now have pet church to attract those who love their dogs and cats so much that they can't bear to be separated from them even for an hour or two on a Sunday morning. They also have clown churches, where pastors wear white face paint, wigs of

fluorescent orange, and big red noses. They fold balloons into animal shapes and squirt people with water propelled from plastic flowers on their lapels. These are designed to attract families with young children. Some Catholic churches are experimenting with what they're calling a guaranteed fifteen-minute Mass. No Scripture readings, no sermon, no hymns. Who's got time for any of that? People today are just too busy. So, let's have them just show up, do a bit of the Communion Liturgy, give them all a wafer, and send them on their way with a blessing. And why not? It's a formula that works great for McDonald's. Why shouldn't it work in the Church of Jesus Christ? I suppose the next step will be to install a drive-in window for those who can't spare even fifteen minutes and want to have their Communion to go. And if that sounds improbable, trust me, there's no limit to how far a church might go when marketing is what's driving the train. I recently read of clothing optional church in Virginia that's going all the way, as it were, to attract people from a nearby nudist colony.

The mistake here, the spiritual blindness, is to see the Gospel as a commodity that must be marketed to consumers instead of what it really is: the saving truth that is foolishness to the world, but is the power of God for salvation to those who believe.

Another example is the way a lot of church growth consultants say that congregations should be organized. The old (biblical) model says a church should have pastor who is the servant of the congregation to proclaim God's Word and administer the Sacrament according to Christ's commands. It's his calling to build up the members of the congregation in the Christian faith so that they will be equipped to live the Christian life and show the love of Christ to the world in *their* various callings. The new model borrowed from the business world says that's all wrong. It's inefficient and doesn't push people to realize their full potential as members of the body of Christ. So now the pastor is supposed to be the CEO whose job it is to make sure everyone else does what he used to do. He's not to do any preaching, teaching, or biblical counseling. No, no; he's to be above all that. He's supposed to assign these tasks to others and supervise them to make sure *they* do it right. (Sounds good to me. I'll send around a around a sheet so all of you can sign up for your turn preaching for the rest of the year.)

No. Besides being a complete confusion of our doctrine of vocation and contrary to what the Bible teaches about the office of the public ministry, what really should strike us as arrogant is the way these folks have no problem saying that the church has had it all wrong for past 2000 years; but fear not: we're here to fix it.

It would be a mistake, however, for us to imagine that this is a new problem. Importing worldly business models and ways of thinking into the Church is as old as the Church itself. It's what Jesus is dealing with in today's Gospel lesson. There we read about people who are thinking that the Lord operates according to the principle that says you get what you pay for, or you get what you deserve. And it's generally true in the world. If you work hard, scrimp and save, make the proper investments, and try to succeed, you will; if you don't, if you goof off, cut corners, waste your resources, and cheat, well, you'll most likely fail. Taken into the Church and spiritualized a bit, this idea appears as the law of Karma. It's says that the Lord is just and operates according to a strict system of rewards and punishments. If you behave, play nice, and follow his commands, then he rewards you. If you misbehave, then bad things will happen to you.

Usually this is interpreted retroactively. That is to say, if things are turning up roses for you, it must be that God is rewarding you for being such a fine Christian. But if

bad things happen to you, it means that the Lord is angry with you. I heard this repeatedly following the recent earthquake in Haiti. A number of well-known Christian personalities were saying, "See, see, it's all that voodoo and black magic they do down there. The Lord is punishing them for their sins." They said the same thing following Hurricane Katrina and the devastation New Orleans suffered a few years back. "It's because of all that drunken Mardi Gras revelry that goes on down there every year."

Jesus flatly denies this interpretation of such events. Some people had come to him with the news a recent disaster. Roman soldiers had slaughtered a group of Galileans who came to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Apparently they were in the very act of making their sacrifice when they were cut down. People understood this to mean that the Lord had refused to accept their sacrifice because they were such terrible sinners. For a modern equivalent, what would you naturally conclude about someone who was kneeling here at the altar, and just as I handed him the host – the very body of the Christ – he was struck by a bolt of lightning, or a light fixture fell on him, or he had a massive heart attack, and he died on the spot? You might be inclined to think, "It must be that the Lord didn't want him to take communion and have the assurance of the forgiveness of sin. He must have been a complete hypocrite, somebody who did something awful. That's why the Lord struck him down."

Jesus asked the people who told him about the Galileans, "Is that what you think? Then you missed the point entirely. There is a message from the Lord here. You're right about that; but it's not about those who died so horribly and unexpectedly. It has nothing to do with them. The message is for those who *live*. It's about *you*. What you should come away with from this episode is the certainty that *your* life might end just as quickly and unexpectedly. It could happen at any moment. So ask yourself: Are you ready to meet your maker? Are you ready to stand before the Judge at this very moment? To be more specific: Are you living in sin? Or are you turning from your sin and producing the fruit of repentance?"

To hammer the point home, Jesus follows up with the parable of the unproductive fig tree. The thing to understand is that *you* are the tree. You are the one not doing what the Master wants; namely, you're not producing the fruit of repentance. And now you've been given a clear warning and because of the Vinedresser's gracious intercession, a bit more time to come around. He's trying to work with you. He's stirring up your soil and applying the means to make you productive. He's doing all he can. But the big question is left hanging: will you repent or not? Will you turn from your sin and come under the protection of Christ's forgiveness? Or will you die in your sin and be damned?

It's repentance that the Lord is looking for from his people – repentance from sin and a turning to the righteousness that the Lord provides through faith in Jesus. That's his goal. This is made clear in today's Old Testament lesson where another worldly way of doing business is shown to be contrary to the Lord's way. And here the misconception is the one that assumes that the way the Lord judges people is the same way a basic banking operation works. The belief is this: when you do good, you make deposits. When you sin, you make withdrawals. And obviously some deposits and withdrawals are bigger than others. Really good things you do stash a lot of credit away, and really big sins draw the account way down. So your goal in life is to ensure that you keep a positive balance in your account. That way you'll be ready to face the Judge when you're called to stand before him. In the eyes of the world, it makes perfect sense.

But the prophet Ezekiel makes it clear to his astonished hearers that that's not how it works in the kingdom of God. The mistake is to think that anything good you do is worthy to be counted to your credit. Ah, but the blind sin nature in us is a natural accountant, always happily adding up the score when we do something that seems outwardly to be good. It's not so good at making deductions, though. It usually has excuses and alibis for why when I commit this sin or that, it isn't so bad. Funny, it works exactly the other way around when it keeps score on other people. For some strange reason your good deeds don't earn so much credit as mine; even when we do exactly the same thing. And your sins? Somehow they're always worse and more inexcusable than mine. Isn't that the way we think?

Sure it is. And one of the worst things that happens is when people who feel that they've built up a lot of credit in their account think that it entitles them safely to make a big withdrawal. Too many times I've spoken with people who have been lifelong members of the church and who have fallen into sin say to me, "I don't get it, Pastor. All my life I've done what is good and right. I've tried my best to live as a Christian. I've given my time and money to the church. And now you're telling me that it doesn't count for anything? That just because I've fallen into this sin and refuse to repent, that the Lord takes none of what I've done before into consideration? That's not fair! If that's the way the Lord is going to deal with me, then I don't want anything to do with him." It's truly frightening, but I have heard it. And in reply I've shown people these very passages from Ezekiel and said, "It's not what I'm telling you. This is the Word of the Lord."

The flip side of this wrongheaded thinking is the offense we take when we hear of a deathbed conversion story – especially when it's somebody who's lived a particularly notorious life. Then the tendency is to think "You mean after all those terrible things he did, all he had to do was repent and come to faith in Christ, and he's in the same heaven as the rest of us? That's not fair. He didn't even begin to pay his dues."

The truth of God is that no one pays their dues. Not one of us. And not one of us is able to put any credit into some imaginary goodness account. In the Lord's eyes, all we do is sin. Our imagined righteous deeds, the best we can offer, the things of which we are most proud, he counts as worse than garbage. And that's why his message to all of us is the same. From the most outwardly righteous to the most notorious sinner his Word never changes: Repent of your sin and turn your trust to my Son Jesus Christ who lived the perfect life for you, and who died in your place. That's the Lord's way of doing business.

And since we see that, let's make it our goal always to be about the Lord's business, and to help others see it too. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!