

March 7, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

### **Third Sunday of Lent**

The first day of Spring is just a little less than two weeks from today, but the “signs” of Spring are all around us. The weather this past week, and what seems to be what’s predicted for this coming week, is much more “spring-like” than we’ve seen for quite a while. In the early morning hours, we’re hearing more birds chirping; in fact, on Friday morning, I saw my first Robin.

Along with these pleasant signs of springtime, also comes what may seem to be the more tedious aspects of this time of year, known as the annual “spring cleaning” of our homes/garages/yards/vehicles. When I was talking to my older sister on Friday, she was sharing with me her somewhat detailed plan for this coming week when she begins her “spring cleaning”; it involved: taking down drapes, washing windows, taking beds apart and washing walls. Now that’s some pretty serious “cleaning”! Of course, because of the pandemic and all of us being locked down for the better part of a year now, we may have actually started “spring cleaning” last Fall as many people had nothing else to do than cleaning out closets, cupboards, and garages of all the “stuff” that has accumulated over time.

The Season of Lent and the Season of Spring have a lot in common: they are both about new life, new growth, and “spring-cleaning”. In Lent we try to “clean up” what has become haphazard or undisciplined about the ways we live out our Faith; we “clean out” everything that might have accumulated in our lives that should not be there----practices and attitudes that keep us from being “zealous” in our relationship with God and with one another; we “dust off” the practice of our Faith and renew its fervor. And just as with Spring Cleaning we can choose to just give it (what my mother used to call) a “lick and a promise” approach, OR we can choose my sister’s way of taking everything apart and putting it back together again;---- so too, we can do with Lent. We can breeze thru these 40 days, perhaps even put up with the fasting and sacrifice required, as though it was an endurance test, and then just go back to “business as usual”; OR we can willingly look inwardly----take the time to see how vibrant or weak, our relationship with God and with our neighbor is, in terms of the vitality of our Faith---and then to try to do something to re-vitalize it.

Our Gospel Reading for this Third Sunday of Lent shows us Jesus, at the very beginning of His public ministry, doing some drastic “spring cleaning” of the Temple. St. John recounts this incident by telling us: “... *the Passover of the Jews was near....*”, which is how we know that

this was Spring time. Jesus targeted the moneychangers, and, as St. John told us, “...*drove them all out of the temple area...and spilled the coins of the money changers, and overturned their tables....*” His disciples watched all that Jesus was doing and commented that it was a sign of the “*zeal (He had) for (God’s) house*”. Of course, the Leaders of the Jewish people had a different reaction. They asked Jesus: “*What sign can you show us for doing this?*”, which is a more diplomatic way of asking: “Who do you think you are!?”. Jesus response really threw them off when He said: “*Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up*”. Of course they assumed Jesus was referring to the massive temple where they were gathered---a structure that had taken 46 years to build; but Jesus was referring to Himself--- the “temple” of His own body. The “sign” that Jesus was offering to them was His own Resurrection which would take place three days after His Death; but even more than His comments serving as a “sign”, Jesus’ response gave them His “credentials”----He was revealing to them that He was the Promised Messiah.

The Jewish leaders were not able to “wrap their minds around” what Jesus was sharing with them. It was beyond their ability; they were restricted to what they knew and believed. Can we understand? Do we realize that our bodies are “temples of the Holy Spirit”? Through Baptism and Confirmation, the Holy Spirit of God dwells within us, and is an essential part of our own identity. Those two Sacraments have made “indelible” changes in our very being which makes us a sacred dwelling for God within us. That is why we regularly need to review the choices and decisions we make, and the actions of our lives, to see if they are consistent with the “sacred” and “holy” person we already are because our Baptism makes us into “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart*” ----God dwelling within us. That’s why we need to do “spring cleaning” of our hearts and souls during these Lenten days and weeks.

Today’s First Reading from the Book of Exodus reminds us that God has given all people the Ten Commandments as His basic expectation of how His People are supposed to live together: that we are to worship Him alone and to give Him honor and glory; and that we are to honor and respect one another---our parents, elders, our sisters and brothers in faith, and our “neighbors” who are our fellow human beings. The Ten Commandments provide us with the most basic “tool” for our internal “spring cleaning”. What are we doing that we should not be doing?; what are we not doing that we should be doing? So, the Ten Commandments are not just the basic blueprint for our relationship with God, but also with our neighbor. We can’t say that we love God, if we refuse to love our neighbor. When we harm our neighbor, we break the relationship with God, Who Jesus has revealed to be the Father of all.

As we know, Pope Francis is currently on an historic Pilgrimage to Iraq, a very troubled part of the world. No Pope has ever visited there before. Besides that being the land that we associate with terrorists and our country's enemies, and where there is constant violence and turmoil, it is also the Land where 4,000 years ago, Faith was born. It's the Land where Abraham entered into the Covenant with God---Abraham who is the Father of Faith, acknowledged as such by all people of monotheistic Faith: Christians, Jews and Muslims. It's the Land of Moses and where the Ten Commandments, which we heard about in today's First Reading, were first given by God on Mt. Sinai. In his Talk yesterday to the Religious Leaders in Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, Pope Francis said: "Our Journey of Faith is a journey outward, not turning in on ourselves. There will be no peace unless people extend a hand to other peoples. There will be no peace as long as we see others as them, and not us. There will be no peace as long as our alliances are against others, for alliances of some against others only cause continued division." Then he added: "People who believe in God have no enemies to fight, except the enemy that stands at the door of our heart and knocks to enter---the enemy of 'Hatred'."

As we all know, the Ten Commandments provide the foundation of what God tells us we SHALL do, and what we SHALL NOT do. But the sizes, shapes and variations of what constitutes sins that go against any of those Ten basic commandments are limitless. As society progresses, we also seem to find more modern and high-tech ways of offending God and neighbor.

Sin is an intentional disregard for the good of another or a sense that we know better than God. And just like the whole world has been battling against the contagion and virulence of this CoronaVirus, sin is very much like a spiritual virus---it's contagious, and it's destructive. We're seeing a "rash" of various "isms" that are infecting our society, and all of them can poison our hearts and our attitudes, and can lead us to sin against God and neighbor; from secularism, to materialism, to racism and other-"isms"---anything that dehumanizes the victims, and divides people from one another. These, and so many other evils in our world, call for penance and renewal; that's why our spiritual "spring cleaning" this Lent is so important.

At the end of today's Gospel passage, St. John tells us something very important: "*...(Jesus) did not need anyone to testify about human nature; He Himself understood it well.*" Why? Because Jesus took on our human nature and knows from His own lived experience exactly how we work---what our temptations are---what our struggles are---what our areas of

weakness are. The difference is: we sometimes give into temptation and commit sin; Jesus had many temptations, but He never gave in; He remained ever faithful to His Father's Will.

Our Lenten "spring cleaning" is for the purpose of trying to root sin out of the "temples" of our human lives, and to live up to the best within our human nature, rather than living down to the worst parts of what it can mean for us to be human when we give into sin---when we do not live by the Ten Commandments---when we choose not to follow Jesus in our lives.

In today's Second Reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul told us: "*...the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*" That's a beautiful line worth our pondering and reflection. Certainly God is not foolish, but IF God was foolish, He would still be wiser than the wisest human being. Certainly God is not weak, but IF God was weak, He would still be stronger than the strongest human being! Isn't that a wonderful thought?

We are God's precious children. God has created us to be happy in this life, and eventually, to be happy with Him in Heaven. God has given us the tools necessary to find that happiness: the Ten Commandments and the revealed Word of God. God has sent us His own Son to be the Word made Flesh, and to be one with us in our human nature, so that He could show us how to live, save us from the ultimate power of sin and death by His own Suffering, Death and Resurrection, and then to lead us to Heaven. We would be the most foolish, and the weakest, of all human beings, if we chose not to accept those "tools".

So---let the spiritual "spring cleaning" begin. May we "clean up" and "clean out" within our own hearts and souls with the same kind of **zeal** for our own **temple** as Jesus did when He cleaned out God's Temple. May we be open enough to hear God's challenge; may we be willing enough to cleanse our lives; and may we be wise enough to change our ways.

God bless you, now and always!