

3.1.2020 Lent 1 (2 Corinthians 6:1; Matthew 4:1-11)

Years ago I walked in the doors of the church with my best man, my bride-to-be, members of our families, and our minister. The organ played and we said our vows. I walked in the doors of the church single, and walked out – single. It was just the rehearsal. On that day we did almost everything as we would on the day of our wedding, but without the intent necessary for the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. I said the words, “till death do us part,” but remained a single man. My life was still my own, for at that time there was no solemn vow, no life-long commitment, and no promise to truly die to self and live for my bride. These things would come later and prove to be a daily endeavor far more difficult and far more rewarding than speaking the words of the promise.

The season of Lent is an opportunity to reflect on our commitment and faithfulness to another promise and daily endeavor. The sacramental promise that each one of us made on the day of our baptism to die to self and live for another. From the beginning of organized Christian worship there has been a practice for the candidate for baptism to make a formal renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and an explicit promise of obedience to Christ. In baptism we profess our belief in Jesus Christ, our desire to accept Him as our Lord and Savior, and we promise to obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments all the days of our life. And just as it is in the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, saying the words is one thing, living out the promise on a daily basis, that’s something else.

St. Paul addressed that difficulty in the first verse of our Epistle where he wrote, “*We then, as workers together with Him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain*” (2 Corinthians 6:1). In this letter St. Paul is writing to Christians like us, people who believed and were baptized. His words remind us that on the day of our baptism we received the grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit to live our lives according to His will, but these words also point out the fact that God’s grace does not rid us of free-will. Before our baptism we had the freedom to live as we choose, and after our baptism that freedom remains. (Romans 11:22; John 15:2; Hebrews 10:29; Galatians 5:4) We can still choose our own will instead of His, and so Paul warns Christians that to choose to act contrary to the will of God is to

receive His grace in vain, and to frustrate the purpose which His grace was intended to work out. The Bible tells us that Christ offers His grace, that He “*gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works*” (Titus 2:14).

So, Paul tells us not to neglect the grace of God and emphasizes the importance of his message by referring to the words of the prophet Isaiah (49:8) and making this declaration: “... *behold, now is the day of salvation*” (2 Corinthians 6:2b). Christians: The Word of God, the very breath of God beseeches you not to receive His grace in vain for the Christian life is not a rehearsal. We can’t simply say the words without intending to amend our lives, for those who believe and have been baptized have received the grace. We’ve made the solemn vow. We’ve made the life-long commitment. We’ve made the promise to die to self and live for another, so we aren’t in a position to put off living the Christian life until tomorrow any more than a person who has made their wedding vows can put off being faithful to their spouse until tomorrow. This is not the rehearsal – this is *the day of salvation*. For the Christian, there is no time like the present, because there is no time but the present.

On this day of salvation God gives us His grace and calls us here and now to be workers together with Him. In this epistle Paul offers his own example of receiving and responding to the grace of God in his work as a minister of God. He tells us that he does so “*in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings...*” (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). If we take the time to truly reflect on his example we find it overwhelming and convicting. As I read these words and considered how Paul received and then responded to the grace of God I was left praying, “God give me an additional measure of grace, that I may not receive your grace in vain,” because as Paul describes it the Christian life is a difficult and daily endeavor. These Epistles are so challenging because they call us to a life of authentic Christianity that doesn’t feel good to our flesh and is radically different than the culture in which we live.

Those who preach the prosperity gospel would disagree with this statement, but I believe that in the difficult and daily struggle to take up our cross and

follow Jesus we find authentic Christianity. Consider this thought: Who is the enemy going to do his best to discourage, dishearten, and distract? Who is he going to use all his crafts and subtleties against as he tries to lure them into sin? Not those who are already comfortably distracted by the “*cares and riches and pleasures of this life*” (Luke 8:14), but those who endeavor daily to amend their lives, who seek “*first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*” (Matthew 6:33), and who refuse to receive His grace in vain regardless of what it may cost them in this life.

Now consider how that thought relates to our Gospel reading. There we read that immediately after His baptism Jesus “*was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil*” (Matthew 4:1). The moment immediately after Jesus began His earthly ministry, the very moment the fully divine and fully human God-man steadfastly fixed His eyes on the path to the Cross, He was met by the enemy and temptation. This is how the devil works in our lives as well. He uses his considerable power to go right to work on those who receive the grace of God given through the Sacraments, for he knows that they are the outward, visible sign of the Salvation offered to us through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. He knows the Sacraments are a spiritual grace and that as we receive them the members of the body of Christ are united in the name of the One True God, and he knows when fallen man uses his free-will for good, to unite himself to God and neighbor, Satan is being beat down under our feet and his mission “*to steal, and to kill, and to destroy*” (John 10:10) is failing miserably.

Free-will may often be at the heart of our struggle, but it is freedom that allows us to truly love God, and as we struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, it is our Savior’s love and His perfect example that leads us forward, for He didn’t choose the easy way either. He humbled Himself, clothed Himself in human flesh, fasted forty days and forty nights, and then went to meet the enemy – “*the god of this world*” (2 Corinthians 4:4). One thing we see clearly in our Lord’s example is that the devil has perfect timing. He never grows tired, but we do and so he waits until our weakest moment and then offers what may appear to be an easier way. As he basically said to Jesus, “Just bow down before me and I’ll give you the world. You don’t need to go to the Cross, that road is bloody and painful. I’ll show you a

quicker, easier way.” Like every one of his temptations, perfectly timed, and filled with lies, for the world is not the devil’s to give and he wouldn’t give it if it was: *“for he is a liar and the father of lies”* (John 8:44).

On this first Sunday in Lent, I’m reminded that rehearsals are light-hearted and fun. They’re a quicker, easier way, and if not followed by the real thing – they’re done in vain. What is a wedding rehearsal without a wedding? Now on the other hand, solemn vows, life-long commitments, and true promises, these are a difficult and daily endeavor for which we desperately need the grace of God. On the day of our baptism we received the fullness of His grace and were made children of God. So this morning, as we commune with our Father at His table may we by faith receive His grace once more, through the Body and Blood of His Son, and respond to this grace not only with our lips, by speaking the words of the promise, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to His service, and by walking before Him in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, both now and forever, world without end. Amen.