

John 2:13-22
March 7, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

While working as a claims adjuster prior to attending seminary, I had a supervisor remind us often that each phone call we make is an opportunity. You see, most often insureds (i.e., policy holder) only contact with someone at the actual company where they have their policy may be the claims adjuster. This is also true of claimants (i.e., those who are insured elsewhere but because of liability are entitled to damages from an insured's company). Therefore, every phone call or if handling a claim in person, every encounter, is an opportunity to promote the company. It is an opportunity to say "thank you" to the policy holder. It is an opportunity to perhaps make a new policy holder in the future. It is an opportunity to build relationships, walk with someone during their time of need, treat them fairly, and overcome a common-held view that the insurance company is out to get them, to save a buck, even through devious means, and thus cannot be trusted.

Opportunity is what I see in this morning's gospel. Make no doubt about it, this passage is yet another opportunity to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do. It is an opportunity to enter a deeper relationship with him. An opportunity to worship God with no strings attached. Just come as you are.

Now at first glance, it is all too easy to be critical of those of Jewish faith. These were extremely devout children of God coming from miles around traversing dusty and often dangerous roads to celebrate the Passover festival in Jerusalem. To enter God's presence, which was to be found within the Temple. To remember the grandest event in the history of the Israelite people in which God rescued them from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt, through the waters of the Red Sea and provided water and manna to them in the wilderness. Upon arrival, it was customary practice they needed an animal to offer sacrifice in the Temple. It simply was not logistically possible in many cases to bring their own over the course of a long trip. Thus, they were purchased in the courtyards of the Temple

grounds. Jesus is not condoning the people but rather appears to be condoning the ritualistic practices that had been put in place that may have created a stumbling block to one's opportunity to worship God.

Jesus could just as easily be condoning practices of any Christian congregation yet today that create barriers and possibly limit the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus could just as easily be saying to us, "What needs to be driven out of your hearts to experience the grace upon grace I was sent to reveal and for the world to hear, see, taste, touch and experience?" In a society in which buying and selling, everything has a price, is so deeply embedded in our way of thinking, Jesus might be saying to us yet today, "The salvation I have brought, through my death and resurrection," is absolutely, unconditionally free. Believe in me. Come to me. Let nothing stand in the way of the children set before me.

There is a yet another opportunity that may somewhat lay hidden. It is the opportunity to remember what Jesus has done. To recollect his words. To let the Spirit further instill in us the faith to believe the foolishness of the cross, as the Apostle Paul states. It is an opportunity to dwell in the love he shows us in the giving of his life and freedom granted through the raising of his body after 3 days. It is an opportunity to witness to a God who continually creates beginnings, restores, resurrects, and breathes life and hope into bleak moments of our lives. It is the opportunity to pivot from death unto life. Unbelief to belief. Fear into strength. Sorrow into joy. Despair into hope.

The resurrection is what leads to this opportunity. It is what gives a full understanding to what he experiences and does on the cross. It interprets who Jesus is, what God has done in and through him, the grace upon grace John speaks of in his prologue in Chapter 1. His resurrection equips the disciples to move beyond the agony of Good Friday, the fear of enduring the same fate as Jesus did, the shame and guilt of denying and deserting him. The raising up of the temple of Christ's body from the grave of death, darkness, and despair sheds light into their hearts and drives out all that hinders them from proclaiming that which they once did not understand.

After he was raised from the dead, they remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. This is where the opportunity sets in. Because it was then and only then they could witness to the good news Jesus Christ. They embraced their calling as his disciples and they went out to proclaim all they had seen, heard, experienced, and remembered.

Fast forward to the book of Acts in which Peter preaches to the people Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised Messiah. Filled with the Spirit Jesus promised to send to them upon his ascension to be with his Father, Peter proclaims, "We are witnesses to all that he [Jesus] did ... They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear ... He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:39-43). In the next few verses, we learn the Spirit works through Peter's proclamation and many come to believe and be baptized.

Or how about Stephen who is arrested. Just prior to his being stoned to death, he sees an opportunity to testify to his captors about Jesus' identity and while being stoned, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60) Even as he takes his final breaths, Stephen finds opportunity to proclaim the forgiving heart of God that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Or how about Paul and Silas in prison. They sang and prayed and suddenly there was an earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison so as to open all the doors and unfasten the chains of each prisoner. The jailer, which had been fast asleep, arose from his slumber and fearing the prisoners were set free and his own fate for failing in his duties, was approached by Paul who proclaimed to the jailer's question of how he might be saved, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him ... and he and his entire household were baptized resulting in great joy. (Acts 16:25-34)

Jesus sets before us a great opportunity at every moment of our lives. His Spirit causes us to remember the grace upon grace we have in him. The new life we receive daily through our baptism into his body and the forgiveness and salvation found in Him. This past year, and it still seems impossible, it has been a year since we closed the doors to this building and began worshipping in our homes and outdoors when we could, has been long and grueling. There has been grief, sorrow, and maybe even despair. Yet, the Spirit has opened up an opportunity. Just as God worked through the death of Jesus to raise his body to new life, so God has worked through the darkness of this pandemic giving us new opportunities to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Opportunities that have created new relationships with those we did not previously know. Opportunities through pivoting to new ways of making this good news known, worshipping our Lord and Savior, and helping others experience his love.

As we move forward, there will be more opportunities. Opportunities to worship in person once again. Opportunities to continue to sustain and explore new ways of creating online experiences and relationships. Opportunities to proclaim the good news in Jesus Christ. In all things, in all stages of life, in everything we do as a community in Christ, in the ups and downs, joys and sorrows, life and death, there is opportunity to witness to that which the Spirit has helped us remember and believe. Jesus has died. Jesus has risen. He is with us. He loves us. There is always hope. There is always a new day, a new beginning, an opportunity to experience, dwell in, and give witness to the grace upon grace offered through our Lord and Savior. Amen.