

*In Nomine Jesu*  
**Perfect love drives out covetousness**

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this Wednesday of Lent 1:

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to agapes, that is sacrificial, unconditional love, and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.<sup>1</sup>*

Thus far our text.

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Today marks the first of the three Lenten Ember Days, the Wednesday, Friday and Saturday following *Invocabit*, that is, this past Sunday. There are four groups of Ember Days on the church calendar, one set in each of the seasons of the year.<sup>2</sup> The Ember Days appear to have been on the church calendar as early as the third century AD, with a suggestion that the Apostles may have established them. The Ember Days thus likely pre-date many of our high feasts! The original focus of the Ember Days was to *thank God* for His gifts of nature, to *teach men* to use them in moderation and to *assist the needy*. Thus, these are traditionally days of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.<sup>3</sup>

The church, noting Jesus' adaptation of an agricultural theme in His teaching, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,"<sup>4</sup> historically used the occasion of the Ember Days to ordain men to the Office of the Holy Ministry. Furthermore, the Reformation-era churches used the Ember Days to emphasize preaching from the Catechism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for this Ember Day, with the historical emphasis on moderation and almsgiving, it is hardly a surprise that the Holy Spirit moved the Catalina Lutheran Church Lenten planning committee to focus on covetousness and charity!

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:24-5

<sup>2</sup> The other three Ember Days occur during the week between Pentecost and Trinity, during the week following Holy Cross Day (September 14), and in Advent, during the week following St Lucia's Day (December 13).

<sup>3</sup> *Ember Days* entry on Wikipedia.com. Note that the Lenten Ember Days seem to have been added last but were in the church calendar by the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 9:37, Luke 10:2

<sup>5</sup> Weedon, W. What's an Ember Day? *Weedon's Blog. Homilies, Musings and What-not from a Lutheran Chaplain*, February 26, 2007. <http://weedon.blogspot.com/2007/02/whats-ember-day.html>

All sin is deadly; as St Paul reminds us, *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,<sup>6</sup> and the wages of *all* sin is death!<sup>7</sup> As Pastor Morehouse reminded us last week though, the seven mortal sins are particularly perilous, as these are sins from which it is very difficult to repent.

Today we consider the sin of covetousness; a sin of the heart, one into which it is so easy to become enticed, and one which can very quickly lead to theft and murder. King Solomon, who likely wrote today's Proverb, understood this very well, as his father, King David, had fallen into that very trap, having coveted Bathsheba, having had her husband Uriah murdered, and then having taken her to be his own. Solomon thus jumps right into a discussion of this dangerous sin in the *very first Mashal*, or brief discussion of a point of truth, of his book of Proverbs. This *Mashal* forms today's Old Testament pericope, or cutting from Scripture, and sternly warns against falling into the trap of covetousness and the consequent sins of theft and murder.

The signature verse of this first *Mashal*, namely the last verse, may be alternatively translated, "*So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence; it takes away the soul of its possessors (namely, of whom covetousness is the property).*"<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew words for "*gains by violence*" are *Botsea Batsa*, namely to cut off and plunder. In the very sound of these Hebrew words, *Botsea Batsa*, one can almost hear a fracturing take place!

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the authors of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament quoted frequently by Jesus, used the language "*completing the lawless things,*" in this verse, while in Habakkuk<sup>9</sup> they translated the very same Hebrew words to mean "*covetousness.*" Greed is a form of lawlessness, a violent action in the heart, leading to a stealing of the soul!

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>7</sup> Romans 6:23

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 1:19

<sup>9</sup> Habakkuk 2:9

Most of you know that God provides all that you need for this body and life, thus greed runs counter to that reality! Consider the First Article of the Apostles' Creed, in which you are reminded that God "provides (us) richly and daily with all that (we) need to support this body and life. He protects (us) from all danger and guards (us) and preserves (us) from all evil."<sup>10</sup> You are further reminded of God's provision as you pray, "give us this day our daily bread."<sup>11</sup> Finally, in the Second Article of the Creed, you are reminded that, through His Crucifixion and Resurrection, Christ atoned for your sins and made you right with the Father!<sup>12</sup> You should be content, what more could you possibly need?!<sup>13</sup>

Yet without exception, *all* are susceptible to fall into the sin of covetousness, no matter what our vocation in the church and the world, yes even ordained clergy!<sup>14</sup> It is at times when God is growing His church, such as times when His people are prayerfully discerning about expanding His worship facilities, "the old evil foe"<sup>15</sup> viciously attacks.

Covetousness is a clear violation of the Second Table, Commandments 7, 9 and 10. Dr. Luther's *Large Catechism* reminds us that Scripture teaches that when you covet your neighbor's property, even if you eventually obtain it through legal means, you still have sinned, as you have "...injured your neighbor... coveting your neighbor's property, that is, aiming at possession of it, luring it away from him without his consent, and being unwilling to see him enjoy what God has granted him."<sup>16</sup> An example of this is given in the February *Lutheran Witness* of a man whose neighbor is an elderly widow in possession of a 1969 Chevy Camaro, which he covets. Knowing that she has no clue as to how much the car is worth, the man offers her \$500 for a

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<sup>10</sup> Small Catechism, II.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, III.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, II.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 12:15, 1 Timothy 6:6-8

<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 6: 13, 8:10

<sup>15</sup> Luther, M. Lutheran Service Book, Hymn 656, verse 1

<sup>16</sup> Large Catechism I:307

vehicle that can command \$50,000 once it is fixed up, and thus has injured her.<sup>17</sup>

Remember though, that when you covet, even when you do not physically receive that which you covet, *in your heart you have taken it!*

When you covet, you renounce the true God and make an idol of *yourself*, violating the Law revealed to His people in His First Commandment *and* His Natural Law, which He has inscribed on every man's heart!<sup>18</sup> Covetousness defiles you!<sup>19</sup> When you covet, you get into a cycle in which you covet more and more, and entice others into your sinful ways.<sup>20</sup> When you covet, you incur God's wrath<sup>21</sup>, and "*have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*"<sup>22</sup>

As Pastor Palmer frequently says, though, "BUT GOD!!!" In the verses immediately preceding today's Epistle lesson, you are reminded that though you could do nothing to atone for your sins and deserve death, God sent His Only Son to die on the Cross, one final and perfect sacrifice to atone for your sins and the sins of all men for all time! You are declared righteous and holy and brought to what God intended you to be, because of this sacrifice. The Holy Spirit in turn enlightens you that through Christ-crucified, you are renewed, and your sins and lawless deeds, even covetousness, are remembered no more! In your Baptism, you were a passive participant in that glorious exchange, in which Christ took on your sin, and clothed you with His righteousness! Therefore you may, with the confidence that comes with a clean heart, approach the Mercy Seat that was previously accessible only to the high priest once a year, and receive His touch, namely His Word and Sacrament, through your ears, eyes and mouth, assuring you that that your sins are forgiven and that you are right with the Father!

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<sup>17</sup> Don Meyer, "Whatever it Takes: God Has an Antidote For Our Sinful Coveting." *Lutheran Witness*, 2017; 136(2):16

<sup>18</sup> On renouncing God, see for example Psalm 10:3 and 1 Timothy 6:10. On idolatry, see Colossians 3:5. Regarding covetousness and Natural Law, see Romans 1:29.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 7:20-3

<sup>20</sup> 1 Timothy 6:9, 2 Peter 2:3, 14

<sup>21</sup> Colossians 3:6

<sup>22</sup> Ephesians 5:5

God gives us opportunity to gather together right here at Catalina Lutheran Church not just once a year, but at least four times *each week* to approach His Mercy Seat and receive His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation! In the phrase, “*Let us draw near...*”<sup>23</sup> note the plural use: as one of our Pastors so frequently reminds us, the “me and Jesus” approach is alien to God’s Word. Notice all of the “*we’s*” and “*Let us*” in this portion of Scripture, and the use of “*us*” in the Collect!<sup>24</sup> God has called *us as a group* to put on His Armor, encouraging each other to the end that we truly *hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering*, that Satan may not prevail over us!

Having been declared holy and been granted entrance to this holy place, you, individually and together, are called to *agapes and good works*. It is worth briefly reflecting on the meaning of the word “*agape*,” which is not fully captured in the simple term “*love*,” seen in the ESV and other English translations. The word *agape* from early times in Christian circles has been used to describe the actions of a higher being reaching down to lift up the lower,<sup>25</sup> distinguishing Christ’s faith from the ancient Greek religion, in which it was all about man reaching up to join with the gods.

The word *agape* or one of its derivatives appears 320 times in the New Testament!<sup>26</sup> It speaks to the love the Father has toward the Son, all rooted in Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>27</sup> It speaks to the Son’s love of the Father that He willingly took on the sin of all mankind, being stricken, smitten and afflicted and dying on the Tree.<sup>28</sup> It speaks to the Father’s love for all humanity that He sent His only begotten Son to be lifted up for the forgiveness of sins, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 10:22

<sup>24</sup> Dietrich Collect for Lent I

<sup>25</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, *Agape*, in Gerhard Kittel, ed. and Geoffrey Bromley, trans. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964) 37 Hereafter TDNT(1)

<sup>26</sup> Combined occurrences for G25, G26 and G27, data from biblehub.com

<sup>27</sup> See for example Matthew 3:17, 17:5; John 3:35, 10:17.

<sup>28</sup> John 14:31, Lutheran Service Book, Hymn 451, verse 1.

<sup>29</sup> John 3:14-16

It is *this* type of sacrificial, unconditional love, the supreme act of charity, true *agape*, to which you are called, and to which we are to stir each other up! This is how you are called to love God.<sup>30</sup> Husbands, this is how you are called to love your wives.<sup>31</sup> This is how you are to love each other.<sup>32</sup> This is how you are to love your neighbor,<sup>33</sup> the one near to you in need.<sup>34</sup> This is how you are to love even your enemy, remembering that Jesus died for you while you were still His enemy!<sup>35</sup>

As we recently heard a couple of Sundays ago, this type of love is patient and long-suffering and kind, full of service to others.<sup>36</sup> When you walk in this sacrificial and unconditional love, you suppress your covetous desires as you help your neighbor improve and protect his property and business, and encourage your neighbor's wife in her vocational call to her husband and family!<sup>37</sup> The charity that emerges from this sacrificial and unconditional love, as noted in our Gospel reading, is done without fanfare, and does not keep track.<sup>38</sup> Sacrificial, unconditional love toward God and neighbor fulfills both Tables of the 10 Commandments; on it depend all the Law and the Prophets!<sup>39</sup> Through Christ's blood, you have been gifted with freedom from the wrath of God!<sup>40</sup> In that freedom though, you have been called away from the covetous desires of your flesh to such works of sacrificial and unconditional love.<sup>41</sup> The old Adam in you continually pulls you toward the passionate love which "desires the other for itself,"<sup>42</sup> hence the need to continually meet together and stir each other up to *agape*.

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew 22:37

<sup>31</sup> Ephesians 5:25-33

<sup>32</sup> See for example John 15:12

<sup>33</sup> See for example Matthew 22:39, Galatians 5:14

<sup>34</sup> Luke 10:25-37

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 5:44, Romans 5:8

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4

<sup>37</sup> Ephesians 5:1-5, Luther's commentary on Galatians 5:13, Small Catechism I

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 6:1-4, Mark 12:41-44, Lutheran Service Book, Hymn 787, verse 2

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 22:37-40

<sup>40</sup> Luther on Galatians 5:1, also the Exhortation

<sup>41</sup> Galatians 5:13

<sup>42</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, TDNT (1) 35

Today's Epistle text concludes with some tough rhetoric! If you go on deliberately sinning in spite of knowing the truth of Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of sins, you profane His very blood shed at Calvary, and can expect to spend an eternity in the Lake of Fire,<sup>43</sup> as there is no other sacrifice beyond Christ's Crucifixion!

At this point you realize that you are in a condition of deep woe, or trouble. The word for "*woe*" in the original language from the first line of our hymn<sup>44</sup> is one that means affliction, and is a word that is used on fire escapes and ambulances! You are terrified, which is good because this means that you are *not* lost! As you confess and repent from your sins of covetousness, of neglecting to gather, of not acting in *agape* love toward God and neighbor; as you repent of all of your sins, which *all* merit death, you cry out to God, asking that He deliver you as He promised through David in the Introit and the Psalm appointed for today.<sup>45</sup> The word for "*salvation*" in the original texts of these readings is the very name "*Jesus*"! Through Christ, crucified for the forgiveness of your sins, God will indeed deliver you, absolving you through our Pastors, and freeing you once again to enter this holy place with confidence and receive His assurance that your sins are forgiven and that you are right with Him, for *faithful indeed is the One having promised!* Amen.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

Wednesday of Lent I, *Invocabit*

Psalms 50 (morning) and 91:1, 15-6 (the *Invocabit* introit, evening); Proverbs 1:10-19; Hebrews 10:15-31, Matthew 6:1-4

March 8, 2017

Read by Roni Grad, approved by Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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<sup>43</sup> Revelation 20:15

<sup>44</sup> Lutheran Service Book, Hymn 607, verse 1

<sup>45</sup> Psalm 91:1, 15-6; Psalm 50:14-5, 23