

Sermon: Year B, III Lent
Texts: I Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

In my elementary school, beginning somewhere around the third grade, one of our regular class exercises was the recitation of the five marks of Christian orthodoxy. They were conveniently arranged in an acronym that, for Dutch children, bore all the marks of divine inspiration. I remember it to this day: TULIP – which stood for these doctrines – Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints. These, we were told, were the essential measures of true faith. As eight year olds, we never quite knew what atonement meant, much less perseverance of the saints, but I do remember that total depravity loomed large in our imaginations. It was bred and nurtured daily on the playgrounds, especially since we had just arrived at that first spurt of growth, when ungainly physical differences began to appear – with no small bit of ridicule following close behind. These two words connected with us.

I suspect that few classrooms adhere to the same regimen any more. Other, more affirming, practices have replaced it. And I don't know of anyone who openly holds to the idea of total depravity. It sounds so absolute. Depravity is a strong word, which we reserve for the worst among us, the kind of people we consider irredeemable, whose names we publicly post so that everyone can be adequately warned of the danger they pose, if given the slightest opportunity. If such depravity were total, then the world would seem unimaginably dark.

But this isn't what the great Reformers intended by the doctrine. It wasn't meant to be so all-consuming. For them, it was only fair notice that we can always be surprised by sin's appearing – anywhere. Just when we think that everything is in order – just when we believe that everything is orderable – we may be stunned by deceptions, corruption, and collapse. Everything is not bleak, not bleak at all, but, don't kid yourself, everything is vulnerable. And it is just this fissure, deep in the world and deep in us, that we tend to forget.

It's easy, after all, to be taken by grand ideas. Let me read for you a statement made by the social planner, Robert Owen. He urged the following: "Let not the powers of the world hesitate... [If only we embrace the right plan] the human race shall be perpetually well born, fed, clothed, lodged, trained, educated, [and] employed... and best fit... for whatever change may occur after death." That's quite a vision – seamless. It supposes that everything that's needful can be obtained. Owen wrote this in 1857, when the Industrial Revolution was in full swing and, with the development of amazing new powers, the world seemed to be on the brink of complete organization. As he concluded, we are now capable of achieving a "new state of rational existence... when truth, peace, harmony, perpetual prosperity, and happiness shall reign triumphant." Somehow, however, this advancement was also turned to other ends. Soon enough, with equal efficiency, it became the engine that drove two devastating world wars.

An echo of Owen's vision can be heard in our own time in Jeffery Sachs' recent book, The End of Poverty. He stated that "technological progress enables us to meet basic human needs... and to achieve a margin above basic needs unprecedented in history... our breathtaking opportunity is to spread the benefits of science and technology... to all parts of the world... to secure a

perpetual peace. The world community has at its disposal the ... human courage and compassion to make it happen.

These words came to mind for me a few weeks ago in the Dominican Republic when a small group of us attended a groundbreaking ceremony for a new alcohol refinery. It was quite an event. The factory was to be built on the outskirts of Consuelo, several miles up into the sugar cane fields, and political leaders from all around the country had come to praise this venture. The President of the country flew in by helicopter and gave the keynote address. Several regional governors spoke as well. They were joined by the principal investors, sharply dressed representatives of largely European interests. This refinery, they all affirmed, would be just the beginning of a whole new and upward trajectory for the area and the people. It would provide 2,500 jobs and increase the value of the country's primary crop. The press was there in force. An elegant reception followed the formal agenda. The mood was euphoric. And I have no reason to doubt that much of what was promised might, indeed, come to fruition.

When we left, we joined a long line of official vehicles that rumbled down a single dirt lane cut through the cane. We could see the path of the road chiefly by the huge clouds of dust raised ahead of us. Along the way, we passed a small batey, Haitians, cane workers, eking out a bare existence, stranded amid the inhospitable fields. A few small goats were tethered nearby. Children without clothes were meandering about. The adults looked weathered, old, and weary. The barracks were crumbling and dark. Poverty can be experienced in many different ways. This was aching. I wondered how many others noticed these people as we raced by in our SUV's. I wondered what they thought of all our signs of progress speedily passing them by. And in that moment, Mark Regis, who was sitting next to me, leaned over and said, "All this development will be good for the Dominicans, but it will further enslave my people. Their lot just got worse." I don't doubt this either. I turned in my seat to watch the batey recede from view. It seemed an act of witness, one very small attempt to honor their plight and temper the general enthusiasms that didn't take them into account. To see them – to take notice – was just as important as celebrating a future factory. The problem with plans is that people have an awkward tendency to get in the way. Theories are always vulnerable to a more recalcitrant reality.

This, I think, is very much at issue in the Gospel read this morning. Much is often said about Jesus' cleansing of the temple and his attack on the money-changers. Money and religion is always a ripe topic. But, often, little is said about the more important part of the passage, the second half. Jesus declared that the temple could be torn down, and he would raise it up in three days – a statement that was summarily dismissed by the crowds. It seemed preposterous – particularly because the temple and all its practices and disciplines were, in their minds, the seamless order that would bring peace and prosperity and the full realization of the covenant. It was a long time in the making – forty six years of labor on the building alone, but this was the center and this would be the source of God's promise: in the keeping of the law, in religious sacrifice, and in the rites of the temple.

The irony, of course, was that when God himself entered this place, in the person of Jesus, he was not recognized. "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not."

The long history of Israel stands as a testimony to the failure of systems to bring peace and order, no matter how exhaustive, or developed, or inspired they are – always, somehow, sin has a way of appearing. But what Jesus announced was that this didn't matter. It didn't matter because God himself was present. What, then, was the temple in comparison? God had crossed the distance, in the humbleness of incarnation and in the desire to be intimate enough with us to share our failures and our woes. Jesus didn't come with a plan in hand, or a new theory for social advancement. Nor did he offer solutions for the problems of the day. We have no grand Christian blueprint for prosperity and happiness.

What we have been given, however, greater than all these, is the assurance of God's friendship and companionship through thick and thin. We will never be abandoned. We will never be passed by or be counted out because we didn't fall in with the program – because God has already given all of himself to us. One person has interceded, and that singular sacrament takes precedence over all of the world's grand designs. Here, in Jesus, is the one place where total depravity is irrelevant. This is what we practice each Sunday.

And in this we have been given a marvelous freedom because the prime work and joy of being human has been transformed. We live always amid competing policies and sometimes warring ideologies. We are endlessly judged, assessed, positioned and ranked by countless tests and scales. Ordered life. Except we have, still, as persons, the capacity to surprise – not only negatively but with grace and love. At heart, what is so edifying about our mission trips to the Dominican Republic, isn't the work we accomplish; it's breaking free from the usual routines to live, for a time, unusually sacramentally, being there simply to offer ourselves, without need of reason, excuse, or stated purpose: to arrive without announcement, to care when no one expected it, to experience time, the day, its experiences as gift. It's stepping outside the temples that keep us busy in order to see, even in strangers, the presence of God made visible in them – which makes life unconstrainedly beautiful. And this can happen anywhere, surprisingly, wherever we offer ourselves.

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