

### **Lent 3 3.3.24**

When Catholics participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, many confess the “sin” of anger. If you have spoken about that “sin” with me, you might recall what I usually say in response. It goes something like this, “anger is not a sin. It is an emotion that God gives us which helps us to assess a situation. It should then lead us to either run away from that situation or confront it in order to remove it from our midst. It’s what we do with our anger which might be sinful.”

Then I go on to use the example of a mother whose child has been harmed. A mother will justifiably get angry when something like that happens. The anger leads her to do one of two things: protecting her little one by removing that child from the harmful situation. Or directly confronting the offense so that no other child will be harmed in the same way. In both cases, the mother does nothing sinful. Rather, she fulfills her godly duty of protecting her innocent one as God demands, motivated by what made her angry.

Anger is sinful when we do something like taking away from the reputation of another by the words we use against them. Anger is also sinful if it leads us to verbally or physically assault another.

As we heard in today’s gospel, Jesus got angry. That anger moved him to action. He overturned the tables of the money changers because “zeal for his Father’s house consumed him.”

Now the work of the money changers was necessary in order to fulfill the Jewish custom of sacrificing in the Temple. The common Roman coins used at the time had a phrase stamped on them which stated that Caesar was a god. Using those coins, especially in the Temple precincts, was considered blasphemy. So those coins were exchanged. And the new coins which one received would be used to purchase items for the Temple sacrifice.

In the course of time, the money changers moved from the outer Temple precincts to the holiest part of that complex. In essence, they elevated their trade to the same level of importance as Temple worship itself. In addition, there’s a likelihood that the money changers overcharged their customers, taking advantage of their naivete and desire to simply offer God the sacrifice which was required. Jesus was outraged by this practice. He got angry about it. His anger led him to do something to rectify this abuse. All the while, Jesus remained sinless.

Since 2006, I have been a part of organizations in Pinellas and Hillsborough Counties that work for biblical and godly justice for the people who live there. In Pinellas County that organization is called FAST – Faith in Action for Strength Together. Our Lady of Lourdes Parish is one of 50 congregations involved in this ministry. Throughout that time, we have worked on issues like better water quality for our county and its waterways, reducing the arrest rates of children and youth who do something as mindless as stealing oranges off a neighbor’s tree (while still being held accountable for their actions), and seeking to make more affordable housing available for those who are financially struggling in our county.

You probably know that we have a wonderful St. Vincent de Paul Society in our parish. That ministry offers food to anyone in our community who asks for it. While that ministry fulfills the biblical mandate to feed the hungry, it is not able to begin to address the issue of folks who eat that food in their cars because that’s where they live. While some folks may be able to take that food to their apartments or rental homes, they may not have air conditioning in those places or they may not have the medicines they need to stay healthy because they spend almost all their income on rent, with little or no money left for anything else.

For twenty years now, the clergy and members of those fifty congregations have gone before county commissioners and mayors of our various municipalities seeking their leadership to address the issue of a lack of affordable housing in our communities. When I attended or led meetings about this issue in those early years, our elected officials downplayed the issue saying there was no affordable housing crisis in our county. Today, no one will run for office in our county without having the issue of affordable housing on their slate of things to address if elected. Right now, in Pinellas County, there are tens of thousands of citizens (our sisters and brothers in Christ) who cannot afford to live here because they

spend so much money on their rent and have little or no money left over for life's other necessities. The work and intervention of members of FAST has led some cities and our county to set aside money from their budgets for affordable housing and for keeping that housing at an affordable level for years to come. If you've been a part of the ministry to Pinellas Hope you have probably seen the apartment housing that's there which was built with a loan from this trust fund. FAST helped that to happen.

Many years ago, I led a meeting of about 20 clergy and laity with one of our elected officials. (To be clear, it wasn't here in Dunedin.) We told him about the need for more affordable housing in our city. We proposed some possible solutions but sought his counsel asking if he knew of better ways to resolve or address this issue. I/we were direct, our research was factually based, we shared the biblical instructions from our faith traditions which mandated this, and this is how he reacted. He told me to stick to pastoring. He was in charge. He had the answers, but he didn't have to tell us what he was doing. When I said that we elected him to serve us, he began to berate us and attempted to divide us. A few days after that meeting, he called the bishop and told him that the Catholic clergy who attended that meeting, and me in particular, should be removed from our churches, or at the very least, the bishop needed to "reign these renegade priests back in." While I still strive to show respect to that elected official, since I see him at events every once in a while, I think it's fair to say that his anger was not the justified anger of Jesus.

The bishop called me to his office about the matter. I took a deep breath when trying to explain the situation to him. And then I waited for his reaction. He told me to keep doing what I was doing.

If you have participated in a peaceful, prayerful vigil outside an abortion clinic, you are probably familiar with pushback and harsh statements with those you encounter, and even worse.

Our faith is a lot of things. It's about prayer and proper worship. It's about fellowship and camaraderie. It's about growing in our knowledge about God and deepening our relationship with him. It's about feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and bringing the gospel to our jails.

But our faith is also about standing up for those who need long-term help and long-term solutions. It is about standing up to those who aren't interested in going the extra mile for those who are suffering. It means speaking the truth and preaching the gospel even when someone in power attempts to demean us or take away from our reputation. It's about engaging in the hard work of justice and building up God's Kingdom among us, even when it takes five, ten, or twenty-plus years to see works of justice bear fruit for our sisters and brothers in need.

Lent is about turning back to God and away from sin. It's about becoming holy as God is holy. When we think of our Lenten practices, the majority of them probably deal with the personal aspect of our spiritual lives and relationship with the Lord. But the other side of the Lenten / spiritual coin is the concern we must necessarily have for others and for our community. And so, while Lent is a time for giving up an item we enjoy or engaging in a spiritual practice like going to Mass each day, it is also a time for action and setting things right, working to make the Kingdom of God a tangible reality among us. We do that by standing up to someone's misdirected anger, by supporting those in need who cry out for help, by working for justice or long-term solutions for others, as with those who need affordable housing. Lent is supposed to make us different. It exists to help form us into the image and likeness of God. It should also result in our community being different, reflecting God's Kingdom in our midst as well. That difference is reflected in how we care for our community and how we care for EVERY citizen in our community.

Living Lent isn't for the faint of heart. But neither was Christ's crucifixion. United with our Lord and Savior who suffered, died, and rose on the third day, may our acts of mercy and justice during this holy season and beyond, deepen our faith, make God visible among us, and serve as building blocks for his Kingdom in this world.

Amen? Amen.