

Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time B - What we see is scandal; what God sees is grace.
June 27, 2021.

In the 1990 movie “**The Godfather, Part III.**”, the Mafia godfather, Don Corleone, goes to Rome to negotiate a business deal with the Vatican. He is not interested simply in business; he wants to gain respect. There he meets with Cardinal Lamberto, who asks if he would like to make his confession. At first Corleone refuses and jokes that it would take too long. However, he wants the cardinal’s help, and senses something redemptive in his presence. So Corleone begins his confession. **“Your eminence, I... it’s been 30 years”**. First he tells of his marital infidelities, then about ordering the murder of his own brother. Overwhelmed by the burden of his guilt, he breaks down and starts to sob. Cardinal Lamberto pronounces the words of absolution, then says, **“Your sins are terrible. It is just that you suffer. Your life could be redeemed, but I know you don’t believe that. You will not change.”**

Some may find this story scandalous and is only in movies. Can’t be in real life! Here we have a career criminal, an adulterer, cold-blooded killer of his own brother, and yet he’s said to be forgiven, redeemed. Some may say that what’s called for here is not mercy, but punishment, revenge, a settling of scores. Yet if there’s a scandal here, it’s the scandal of Christianity. Remember the first of the seven last words Jesus says before his death on the cross: **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** (Luke 23:34). Behind Cardinal Lamberto’s words is the blood of Jesus, God’s Lamb, who takes away the sins of the world. And the Holy Spirit is hard at work in this encounter with Don Corleone. The Holy Spirit cracks open the hard heart of the Mafia man, and gives him tears of repentance for the horrors he has committed. **The scene of confession becomes a resurrection morning. Don Corleone is raised from the death brought by his sins into the new life Christ offers him.** Some may call this a scandal. **But for us Christians, what people call scandal is when grace is at work.**

Consider this Sunday’s Gospel reading (Mark 5:21-43). Jesus raises from the dead a twelve-year-old girl, the daughter of Jairus, a big man in town. Jairus makes a fool of himself in public, begging Jesus to help his sick child, insisting that he can restore her to health. Jesus goes with Jairus, but on the way they encounter people coming to meet them who report that the girl is dead. But Jesus tells Jairus not to fear, simply to believe. When they arrive at the house, people are weeping and they probably expect Jesus to give the parents his deepest condolences. Instead, He goes to where the girl is lying, accompanied only by the three disciples that are with him and the girl’s parents. There Jesus takes the girl by the hand and tells her to get up. She gets up immediately and starts to walk about. Jesus tells them to give her something to eat.

Do you hear scandal in that story? What Jesus does seems to be nothing other than a compassionate response to the girl and her father. He takes her by the hand! He touches a corpse! An absolute no, no! **According to God’s law in the Hebrew scriptures, touching a corpse renders a person unclean. The people around Jesus are shocked, much as some people may be shocked when Cardinal Lamberto absolves Don Corleone.** The people around Jesus believe that purity must be maintained. The Gospel story ends with Jesus giving orders, first for the girl to get something to eat, and let no one know what has happened to Jairus’ daughter. We know the girl would get something to eat but the news of her being alive spread like wildfire. It seems to me that Jesus doesn’t want to be labeled simply as someone who comes into town and does a bunch of neat miracles. The focus of Jesus’ public ministry is healing: healing of the body and soul, making people aware of the life-giving presence of God. As Christians, we are called to follow Jesus’ example of showing the healing compassion to people in need, sometimes simply doing the ordinary things in life so that the love of God can be

made real for them. **Jesus wants people to know him because of something yet to happen, that work of grace more scandalous than any other, when he will die on a cross of shame and be raised in glory by the Father.** That scandal will bring grace, not just to one person or a few, but to all creation.

We are here to celebrate Mass, the greatest of all God's scandals: the cross and resurrection. But some people simply cannot take it. They want a world more orderly, more fair than that. But **we Christians are given instead a world of undeserved mercies, where fear gives way to belief.** Yet in this world we still quite readily become fixated on wrongdoing and we overlook grace. We see a sinless victim dying on a cross. God sees the lamb victorious over evil. We see a law-breaking rabbi who touches a corpse. God sees a once-dead girl now dead no more and restored to her father's arms. We see a Mafia godfather, a man with a heartless heart and vicious life. **God sees one of his children, hard heart now broken, tears flooding forth, now dead to his past and given a fresh start. So often what we see is scandal; what God sees is grace.**

Remember the **attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II** on May 13, 1981? The Pope was shot and wounded by Mehmet Ali Ağca. The Pope was struck four times and his life was in danger but he later forgave Ağca for the assassination attempt and Ağca was later converted into a Catholic. Yes Pope John Paul II is a saint but we are not. Forgiveness, no way! So what about the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania that forgave the person who murdered children in their school in 2006? They even donated money to the offender's widow and children. We pray we are able to imitate them **"If you forgive others of their faults, the Father who is in heaven will also forgive you."** (Matthew 6:14). By Confession, each of us is on the receiving end of reconciliation. Christ always addresses us through words like those of Cardinal Lamberto: **"I know you don't believe this, but you have been redeemed."**

Christ always risks ridicule and misunderstanding by lifting us from death like Jairus' daughter, and restoring us to life and to relationship. **His grace comes to us free, but its price for him is the cross. For us he bears shame, abandonment, and death. He does it for us. He does it for all.** Christ makes each recipient of reconciliation also a minister of reconciliation. His expectation is that those who have been forgiven will forgive; those who know new life will offer new life to others. It may mean announcing to a hardened sinner that his sins do not exceed God's ability to forgive. It may mean making room for undeserved mercies for ourselves and for others, understanding that we all are sinners and we all are redeemed even though some still see mercy appears unjust. **May we recognize the opportunity when it is placed before us. May we see past scandal and welcome grace.**