

John 2:13-22  
March 7, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, let's say I went into the 7-11 and took a candy bar without paying for it - after Easter of course, because I gave up chocolate for Lent. But anyway...

If I took a candy bar without paying for it, we would call that.... Stealing, right? Stealing. It's right there in the 10 Commandments - #7 by Lutheran counting. You shall not steal.

Taking something that doesn't belong to us without giving something in return is wrong. Why is it wrong? Well... because it hurts other people. By stealing a candy bar, I'm causing pain to someone else, and I'm not living up to my side of the bargain.

The owner of the store paid for the candy bar and I need to pay them back for it with a little extra to cover rent and the people working at the store. That's how they make a living.

If people just came in and took everything without payment, then the owners of the store would have this huge debt and all of the employees would have to be fired and have to find another job someplace else, and everyone who uses that store for their morning coffee would be really sad.

Commerce is transactional. Someone acquires something, like candy bars, at a cost and then they pass that cost off to the person who comes in to buy it. Transactional.

But, let's say, you already own the candy bar. It's already yours. It was gifted to you by your grandmother. If it's already yours, you don't have to pay for it, right? Right. You can walk around the 7-11 eating your candy bar without any guilt, because the candy bar is already yours. You don't owe anyone anything for it.

That's pretty self-evident, right? Although you might want to tell the cashier - Hey, I'm coming in here with my candy bar that I already own. Although, I'm not sure why you would want to eat a candy bar you already

own at the 7-11, but maybe you needed a carton of milk to go with your candy bar.

Anyway – the point is – if it's already yours, you don't have to pay for it.

So, let's now take a trip back to Jesus' time – the year 30.

According to the Gospel of John, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, he goes to the temple with his freshly minted disciples and turns over the tables of the money changers and chases the animals out of the temple.

Why?

Well. As Jesus says, the temple authorities had made God's house into a market place. They made access to God transactional, as if it was something to be sold and bought. The temple had become like a 7-11, but one that only used Canadian money so you would have to change your dollars before you could buy anything.

I don't know about you, but I can see where this made Jesus mad. The temple authorities were selling something that wasn't theirs to sell, and in so doing they were breaking the... Anyone? The second commandment.

They were making wrongful use of the name of the Lord. They were saying something about God that isn't true. They were saying – you have to buy salvation. They were saying – there are walls between you and God and to get through them you have to pay a toll. They were making grace transactional.

And so Jesus clears out the animals and turns over the tables of the money changers.

You'll notice it's the animals that get chased out, but not the people.

The money changers and those selling animals are allowed to stay. Jesus does that to make it clear that nothing separates anyone from God – not even blatant sin, which those selling animals and changing money perhaps didn't even realize they were doing. They were there by the authority of the managers of the temple.

And so, they demand of Jesus – give us a sign to show us you are allowed to do this. Prove to us your authority over the temple.

Jesus proclaims to them that he will be killed by these very authorities of the temple, but on the third day he will rise again.

That's the sign, but they are going to have to wait for it. For now, they just need to know that our relationship with God is not transactional.

Jesus pays for our sin. He takes our sin on himself. He is the Passover Lamb. And he gifts us our salvation.

Jesus alone restores our relationship with God and gives it to us as a free gift, no strings attached. The Corinthians had a really hard time swallowing that. What do you mean it's not transactional? That's foolishness.

It's foolishness, because we thrive on transaction. I do for you, you do for me. And it was especially that way when it came to the Greek pantheon of gods. You want a good crop, make a sacrifice to Demeter. You want to get married, give a sacrifice to Aphrodite. You want to win a war, give a sacrifice to Ares. You want a lot of children, give a sacrifice to Artemis. You want to know the future, go to Delphi and pay the oracle.

Everything was transactional, especially when it came to the divine. You had to give in order to get.

But, that goes totally against the God of Israel who creates everything and then gives it to humankind to use for our wellbeing.

God gives first and all we can do is respond. You cannot buy salvation. It is a gift. It is a gift of relationship. And we all well know, you cannot buy a relationship. You cannot buy love. It can only be received and reciprocated, and it is eternal.

Real relationships of love are eternal, because they are not transactional. They do not depend on either party paying for it. They depend only on love, repentance and forgiveness.

And so we have been gifted with the 10 Commandments to remind us how to be in a loving relationship with God and with one another. And it's not

that we just don't steal what isn't ours, but that we care enough to make sure the other person keeps what is theirs.

Remember our baptismal covenant – to seek justice and peace in the world. God's justice is everyone getting a fair shake. Stealing and taking advantage of another person is the total opposite of that.

As it says in 1 John 4:20 – Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

It's all about relationships. Our relationship with God and thereby our relationship with others. That's why the big 10 start with our relationship with God and then go on to be reflected in our relationship with others. And it all starts with #1 – God alone is God. All we can do is walk humbly with God – with God – in a relationship.

And it's a free relationship. There is no debt.

God already loves us, because God created us.

There is nothing we can give to God, because God gives everything. All we can do is respond, because it's not a transaction – it's love.

So, as we continue on our Lenten journey, may we remember that observing Lent has nothing to do with transaction and everything to do with growing deeper in love with God.

What we give or what we give up is purely a response to Jesus' wide open arms. Those same arms that have destroyed every barrier between us and God, including death itself.

Thanks be to God. Amen.