

All for one; and One for all

JESUS!

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

I've heard that in polite company, we're not supposed to talk about money, religion, or politics. Well, we are certainly in polite company tonight. But spoiler alert: I'm going to talk about two of the three.

I've found it interesting as I've watched and read the news over the last few months in our country. Are people even watching the same events? Consider this: ICE (and I'm not talking about frozen water!) operating on the streets of Minneapolis. Does their presence promote justice as they enforce federal laws? Or does it create injustice for those who have been impoverished and persecuted by the governments that were supposed to protect them? Same story. Polar opposite views of what's going on. Or the tragedy of a woman losing her life amid the turmoil up in the Twin Cities. Watching the very same video, some passionately argue that the ICE officer was defending himself. Others are absolutely convinced it was an aggressive and unnecessary use of force that led to her death. The very same video. Two radically different ways of viewing it. So much for the politics.

Now for the religion: That same principle was at work in Isaiah's day in the kingdom of Judah. It was a time of war, bloodshed, and oppression. The armies of Assyria—brutal and cruel—had devastated the land. Towns and villages were ravaged, crops and cattle lost, money and treasure taken. It would soon happen again when the Babylonians came a century later and picked up where the Assyrians left off. Eventually, Jerusalem itself would be destroyed, and the people would be carted off into captivity while watching the temple go up in smoke. THAT was the gritty reality for the people of Judah. And in reaction to all of this, society remained religious on the surface— but rotten at the core.

And this gritty reality was viewed in two very different ways:

From the perspective of the people? When the people of Judah looked at the raging dumpster fire that was their kingdom, they could only assume that either God's mighty arm wasn't all that mighty OR that God's gracious heart wasn't really all that caring. In short: God's the problem.

But from God's perspective, that gritty reality had a completely different cause. Listen to how Isaiah 59 begins: Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. 2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. (Isa. 59:1-2 NIV) Do you want to know why your kingdom and your lives are in shambles? The answer? Look in the mirror. You're the problem. Your sin is the issue. Your rebellion against God is to blame.

In short: You're "All for one," everyone is sinfully looking out for themselves!

The Lord brings the people into his courtroom. The evidence against them is not circumstantial: "For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil" (Isa 59:3-4).

- How is God supposed to reach out a helping **hand** to help hands that are stained with blood?
- How is God supposed to listen to **prayers** when lips speak only lies?
- How is God supposed to speak a word of **truth** to tongues that mutter wickedness?
- How is God supposed to ensure **justice** when perjury is a favorite pastime?
- How is God supposed to have a **heart** for them when their hearts are clogged with evil?

With people living like that, was it any wonder that life was all gloom and doom in Judah? "So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows" (Isa. 59:9 NIV).

How easy it is to watch the news and see the same sins plastered all over the headlines. War, murder, and bloodshed: Check. Lips that speak lies: Check. Injustice for the poor and needy while the rich grow richer: Check. The Epstein files serve as Exhibit A for much of what Isaiah discusses. And the sad fact is, I don't think many will be surprised by what's found in those files. Nor are we terribly surprised that justice hasn't been blind to society's movers and shakers. "So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us..."

But here is the rub: Jeffrey Epstein and the world's glitterati aren't in the pews of St. Matthew's this Ash Wednesday. We are. Just as it wouldn't do for ancient Judah to blame their predicament on God, so too it won't do to blame all of society's ills on people in the Epstein files, people in Washington, people in Madison, people in the inner city, people down the road, people next door, people over there. They're only in it for themselves!

What we need tonight is not more *disdain* for the sins of others. What we need tonight is not more *justice* as college campuses define it. What we need tonight is not more *truth* as I see it. What we need is this: To place ourselves right next to Isaiah, who places himself

right there with the sins of his people, who are placed right there in the long line of Adam's sinful sons and daughters:

12 For our offenses are many in your sight,
and our sins testify against us.
Our offenses are ever with us,
and we acknowledge our iniquities:
13 rebellion and treachery against the LORD,
turning our backs on our God,
inciting revolt and oppression,
uttering lies our hearts have conceived.

Our offenses are many. Can you imagine the sum of them in my 54 years? Your 80 years? Our offenses are ever with us. I pray, "Remember not the sins of my youth or my rebellious ways." But God knows. And I remember too...

And the worst of it? My sin, your sin, isn't a problem with a random city statue — like driving 32 in a 25 or parking in a spot where you spill over into a no-parking zone by six inches. Want to know what sin truly is? It's rebellion against God - every single time. It's turning our backs on a God who has only ever loved us. It's refusing to listen to the God who has spoken only truth. It's believing the ultimate lie: You, me, we can be like God, knowing Good and Evil. And because of that lie, we lost all that was good and kept all that was evil.

All for one! What a wretched man I am!

And the Lord was appalled.

Where were the leaders of the people? They were leading—leading people astray! Where were the priests? They were going through the motions, but their hearts were far from the Lord. Where was the groundswell of repentance among the people—a mass recognition of their sins and a mass movement of return to the Lord? Nothing. Where were the voices that were pleading the Lord's case with his people? Crickets.

And the Lord was appalled. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene. And how does the verse end? "So the Lord sent the miserable, sinful wretches to hell in a hand basket where the fire is not quenched, and the worm does not die!"

Nope. Not that. Instead, what sinful man would not and could not do, THAT the God of salvation accomplished: so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. And then, amazingly, God himself gears up for war. And we hear this: He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his

head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. So that this happens, “From the west, people will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory.” Translation: God is not the sinful world’s problem. God, in Jesus Christ, is the sinner’s saving solution.

The ONE went to battle for all. For the hands covered in blood, Jesus stretched out his hands upon the cross. For the tongues that muttered wickedness against him, his tongue called down forgiveness upon those who did not know what they were doing. For the lips that spoke false witness against him, Jesus spoke only and always the truth. For every miscarriage of justice, Jesus himself endured the ultimate miscarriage of justice in Pilate’s courtroom. For every person who ever turned their back on him, he himself was forsaken by the Father - reviving the backhand of God’s justice against sin. For every person who ever rebelled against him, he came to draw all men to himself.

And because he did all of that and more, because the One cloaked himself in saving zeal - all of us are cloaked in his perfect righteousness. This is most certainly true: “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the LORD.”

This Ash Wednesday, rejoice that the Lord has given us not what we deserved, but exactly what we need: For all who were in it for number one, the Lord gave his most precious One for all.

“O Savior, when we loved you not, you loved and saved us all;
O great Good Shepherd of mankind, now hear us when we call.”

And everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved! Amen.

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