

St Pius & St Anthony 3rd Sunday Lent Year B2

When I was a kid there was a mystery game that my mother and her friends would play called ‘Bunco’! It was/is such a mystery because we kids never saw mom and her friends play. When she would host the Bunco night at the house, it was ladies only allowed. So, my two brothers and I (and Dad), all the guys had to leave for the night, while they had their game! So Dad would load all of us up, and we would go off to the Drive-In Movie for the night (It was old Cardinal Drive-In off Old Hartford Rd), and they usually ran a dusk to dawn series of movies. But before we left, Dad/Mom would fire up the stove and cook away at pots of popped corn, so much in fact that it filled up one of those old big (two hands to carry) paper grocery bags! Of course, we knew we had the good stuff when we saw the Crisco or butter grease stains on the paper bag! So, even to today, Bunco remains a mystery – we were never there. But the point of me telling this story is that I think we all know why we popped so much corn – because, it would have cost us a fortune (even back then) to feed us guys snacks for that long an evening at the theater! So, we packed up our own!

Another time, I remember working one night in my dad/mom’s store and a middle age woman came in and she loaded up a counter-full of candy bars (to check out, and who am I to meddle, but it seemed odd someone her age to have such a sweet tooth. When I asked her about bagging it, she said, “No, slide them in my purse, they’re for the kids- we are going to the movies! – I wonder, she had so many, she may have been re-selling them herself inside the theater.”

Yet, we are all aware of such costly outings – and aware of the other mystery of why a same hot dog inflates in price so much from when it might be in our meat drawer in our home refrigerator, and then get to costing so much more off the grill at the baseball stadium. From 50 cents at home to eight dollars at the game (or can you even get a hot dog at the game for that price anymore?). What a mystery! Or similarly, how about how gas increases in price the closer you get to the Interstate? Or that bottle of water which only costs pennies at home, can be sold in dollars out at the track or the park?

Well, a similar ‘gouging’ and ‘extortion’, is what has Jesus so riled up in the Temple today! If I had to title this homily, I might call it “Who got Jesus’ goat?” to help explain his anger and blow-up. But I have to emphasize here that Jesus’ upset it is not over animals themselves. Once, I had a kid ask me if Jesus was mad at the mess underneath the animals or was tired of cleaning up after them, leading to Him running them off (*maybe the girl was saying she had been through such a*

time?), but I assured her that Jesus didn't mind the animals, it was the **'sale'** of them and at **exorbitant pricing levels** that angered him. The commercialization of sacrifices in Temple and the financial bullying of the religious devotees by the bosses and bankers at the Temple is what infuriated Jesus. The elders/Temple priests had hijacked religion to serve their own monetary gains. They made the prayers of the people become profits in their pockets. The Temple authorities, were enriching themselves by taking advantage of the religious **obligations** that the Law of Moses imposed on good folks. This was the most irritating rub, about the Temple Elders/Priests exploiting the people, as they were claiming to have God on the side of their grift, since according to the Law of Moses, people were **obligated** to offer suitable sacrifice animals at the Temple. So, if God says you have to do it, then the powers of the Temple, knew they had the best racket ever. They conveniently provided the only acceptable 'lamb', 'goat' or 'calf'. Keep in mind, that Leviticus 22:21-23 defined the 'acceptable' sacrifice as one unblemished, so, no blind animals, or maimed, couldn't have one leg longer than other, or stunted, and not even have a single sore, scab or lesion. And who do you think judged whether it was blemished or not? (You guessed it – the same elders/priests who happened to be selling acceptable ones! *an offer you couldn't refuse*) So even if you thought you might risk bringing one of your own sheep from home, but you lived way up north in Galilee (Jesus' home area), who'd risk the likely injury of your lamb as you traveled along the roads to Jerusalem? Then you'd lose your lamb anyway and still have to buy one at the door. And buying that animal at the Temple door, you paid a premium! This is exactly why Jesus goes ballistic and runs the whole marketplace out of the Temple area. Jesus knew the con, the scam and called for a 'cleansing', a reform, of how the Temple operated. Jesus says, "Turn this place back into the sanctuary of prayer and peace it should be, not a 'fleecing' operation for the greedy elders/priests (and for another level of corruption to this racket, how do you think the elders/priests got their lucrative positions? Due to their holiness? Doubt it! They bought in – follow the money!)

*(Here's a similar type extorting-gouging game that was brought up in the news last week – A national hamburger chain announced that they were going to begin a new program called 'dynamic pricing' or 'surge pricing'. The idea came out of 'supply-demand' economics and suggested that during peak times, their prices would fluctuate **upward** rated with demand. So, the same hamburger could be dollars more in a high demand time period. I do give them credit for backtracking and overruling the roll out after a lot of consumer negative reaction. People saw the injustice immediately: Consider the case that if I am a lower wage worker limited to a lunch hour from 12:00-1:00pm, along with so many others, we would be trapped into that most expensive menu because of the high demand, versus a more wealthy, flexibly-houred worker*

who could just take lunch earlier or later. Classic exploitation - those with the least end up paying the most! Lower class workers were trapped – company knew it & had them hostage!)

Such economic injustice is what Jesus was raging against! And of all places, Jesus wasn't protesting this scene of exploitation at Herod's Parlor or Caesar's Palace. No, of all places, it was God's Temple – What should have been God's Sanctuary – The Father's House, where everyone should be welcome to worship, from rich to poor, highest to lowest class. Yes, a place where all God's children have something to offer, even if just a 'humble, contrite spirit' (Psalm 51:18-19 says it best: *"a burnt offering you would not accept. My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; **a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.**"*) To prove that originally, God wanted to keep sacrifices simple and inexpensive, I like how God had written exceptions into the laws to ensure that even the poor could find a place/way to come sacrifice in the Temple. For example, Leviticus 12:8 had stipulated that "If, however, a woman coming for the purification ritual after childbirth, **cannot afford a lamb**, she may take two turtledoves or two pigeons....." and in Leviticus 14:21-21, God had relaxed the sacrifice offering for a leper's purification sacrifice too (*Great need with lepers, because how, ever, could a leper afford anything - it was impossible for them to work – everyone ran from them*)

So Jesus, was announcing that with sacrifice at the Temple, it wasn't the price value of the animal that mattered, it was the humble gesture of offering to God a return of thanks that counted. The sincerity of a person's heart is what made *good prayer pure*, not the market value priced into it! Prayer is the purpose of the Temple. The Temple meant to turn people to God, not turn a profit for the elders & priests. Jesus wanted to purify the action at the Temple. To show that what we do at the Temple, as Sacrifice and Offering, was an expression of gratitude and prayer, not an extorted tithe or tax (not ever meant to be another bill to burden people). To Jesus the Temple was a place of peace and justice, a place of 'right relationship' between individuals and their God and under God, a place of familial relationship between all people. Again, Jesus was saying, "This place the Father's House, the home to all God's children, no price tags attached!"