

“Through Christ Everything has Changed”

Galatians 1:11-24

With VBS being this week, I thought it appropriate to focus my thoughts on some positive role models. But the positive role models of which I am speaking are not ones whose actions throughout their early life we would want our children to emulate. The three role models we are going to talk about today are St. Paul, the thief on the cross, and Don Michael Corleone -- the Godfather.

We will get to Paul and the thief a little later. The Godfather movies are family favorites with the Eden's. It is in Godfather Part II that the sins of Michael Corleone become manifest. Not that he was an angel in the first movie. He killed two men in a restaurant. He ordered the death of his brother-in-law. He ordered the death of Moe Green and the heads of the other four mafia families in New York, and he had their executions carried out at the same time that he was standing as Godfather at his nephew's Baptism.

All along, he kept promising his wife that within a few years he would only be involved in legitimate businesses. But in Godfather II, Michael commits what was for him the ultimate sin, he ordered the death of his brother Fredo.

It wasn't until The Godfather Part III that we see Don Corleone,

as he is growing old, actually attempting to clean up his act. He gives over 100 million dollars to the Vatican. However, the gift was not truly one from the heart, because certain business advantages were expected from the Pope and the Vatican Bank. His name and his family's name would end up clean and clear. However, Michael's attempts to cover the sins of his past all fail. But then, while visiting the Vatican in Rome, he met a Cardinal, who would later become Pope, who pierced Michael Corleone with the Word of God and encouraged him to confess his sins.

Michael told him that he was beyond forgiveness. His sins were too many and too great. But, after a little urging, he told the Cardinal of the men he had killed, the money he had stolen or swindled, and with true tears of remorse cried out that he had killed his mother's son. The Cardinal told him, "Your sins are great and it is right that you suffer." But he then immediately absolved Michael in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I have never seen a secular movie that better portrays the workings of the Law and the Gospel. The Law is there to crush us and humble us before God and man. However, when heartfelt repentance seeks forgiveness, forgiveness is to be received -- from whomever that forgiveness is sought (God or man). When people are led to repent of their sin, turn away from the lifestyle or actions of their past, and receive God's forgiveness, they are changed, different people.

In the movie, the next day, Michael Corleone told his sister Connie, “Everything has changed.” He gave up control of all his illegal business ventures and lived out the rest of his life in his family’s hometown in rural Sicily. That is the power of the Law and the Gospel working according to the will of God.

This is why Saul of Tarsus, the rotten, evil persecutor of the church, is viewed by us as one of the great champions of the faith. We fondly refer to him as St. Paul. In Paul’s lifetime, he was schooled in the ways of the Pharisees for more years than he preached the Gospel. But we forgive him his errors and misguided way of thinking without hesitation, because he was a changed person after his experience on the road to Damascus. Why do we hesitate to do the same for the people we know who have received the Gospel, received God’s forgiveness, and have become changed people?

Like the mafia Godfather Michael Corleone, and like Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee giving approval as Stephen was stoned to death, God has forgiven the worst of sinners who were humbled and have repented of their transgressions. We are living proof of that.

Martin Luther understood this well. He knew, that even as a member of the clergy who had devoted his life to the proclamation of the Gospel, the study of God’s Word, and prayer, that he was a very sinful man in need of God’s mercy and grace.

In the excerpt from Luther’s writings in the bulletin, we read his words: “Since Christ accepted the thief on the cross just as he was

and received Paul after all his blasphemies and persecutions, we have no reason to despair. As a matter of fact, all of us must be saved just as the thief and Paul were. . . .what do you think it means that he has given his only Son? It means that he also offers whatever else he possesses” (LW 54:17).

Our sinful nature likes to justify ourselves by comparing our current actions to other people’s sins of the past. All attempts to cover up sin will fail. That is not the way God operates. The Pharisees mocking Christ as he hung on the cross had lived pristine lives in the eyes of society, but were utterly contemptible in the eyes of God. Yet the thief on the cross, who was receiving his just reward for the lifestyle he had chosen, who had lived his life as a cancer on civilized society, he had the gates of heaven opened to him that very day. Because he feared God, he was humbled before God, and he put his trust solely in Christ our Lord.

The words spoken by the Cardinal to Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part III* could have been spoken to the thief on the cross, to St. Paul, or to each one of us as we confess our sins in humility before God: He said, “Your sins are great and it is right that you suffer.” But there is Good News – you are forgiven in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. You have been changed. You are now a different person. The sins of the past are gone. The gates of heaven are open to you. Amen.