

Sermon preached by Brian Perkins at the Episcopal Church of St. John Baptist
Sunday, October 30, 2016

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord.

A cruise ship passed by a remote Pacific island, and all the passengers could see a bearded man running around up and down the beach waving his arms wildly.

“Captain,” one passenger asked, “who is that man over there?”

“I have no idea,” the captain answered, “but he waves every year when we pass him.”

Sometimes it is hard to find the common theme during a Sunday’s readings. We can miss the obvious. Since we learn most of the important lessons in life at an early age, I’ve decided to approach these readings through that lens.

In today’s first reading we are continually sinning and God is not happy. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good.” That’s about as direct as a dad talking to a boy with matches in his hand and a pile of newspaper on a pie tin in the middle of the carpet. No mystery there. We’re in trouble.

In the Psalm 32, David declares, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.” He talks of groaning all day before he confesses, and then being happy afterward. Sin followed by confession and forgiveness. It’s what every five year-old boy needs...and is very lucky to find. Happy is about the only reaction possible. The question is whether the lesson is learned. When it is learned, real happiness and safety result.

In our Epistle today Paul gives thanks for the growing faith of the church in Thessalonica despite their persecutions. Many of his introductions start this way, but here he prays that God will make them worthy of his call. They have been transformed and forgiven, but change and action are being demanded of them. Later in the letter they will be asked to stand firm and avoid idleness in the service of God. I can hear my dad now. “Don’t play with matches. It’s not safe. You could burn the house down. Pay attention and take your spanking like a man. And, don’t do it again.”

And then, in our final reading, it all comes together when Jesus seeks out a sinner who happens to be the Chief Tax Collector in the region. He stays with Zacchaeus when it is against all the rules of Jewish society and gives the man forgiveness, ultimately welcoming him as “a true son of Abraham”. In response Zacchaeus gives away half of his possessions and repays all of his debts by a factor of four...at the time the extreme repayment required under the law in case of theft.

The sin occurs and then, forgiveness is not just given, it seeks Zacchaeus out. Jesus declared “I must stay at your house today.” We’re here in church today hoping for forgiveness for the sins we have committed since last Sunday, but Jesus forgave us 2,016 years ago. He sought us out

and offered it freely. We find forgiveness every Sunday because we're forgiven every day and have been for over two millennia.

But I think that the story of Zacchaeus has two great lessons. The first reminds us that we are forgiven, and that God seeks us out to forgive us. But the second is that the real blessing happens when forgiveness is followed by faith. Zacchaeus isn't just forgiven, he believes he is forgiven. He makes a choice. He has faith that he is forgiven. This faith then transforms him and his behavior changes. He makes amends, and you can easily guess what happens next. He will continue to be an imperfect man sinning from time to time, but from then on he is different. He is trying. He is a son of Abraham and he knows it. It is not just his habits that have changed, his heart has changed. That is why Jesus sought him (and us) out. Because Jesus cares about more than just our actions. He also cares about our hearts and our thoughts. Because when our hearts seek God, we not only sin less often, we begin to feel joy and health and happiness. These are the things that Jesus wanted for us so much that he gave everything.

While the matches may be tempting, using them on the carpet is bad. If you learn the lesson, one spanking will do it and the whole family can live happily.

Sin, forgiveness, faith, and change. To me these seem to be the obvious four steps in a theme that ties these readings together.

The first of the four, sin, is a human condition that cannot be avoided. We are all human and imperfect, and therefore sinners. Have you ever wondered why God made us that way? "Free will" was his gift, and it was a risky act of love.

Each of us can remember a moment where everything hung in the balance, and everything depended upon another person. Remember the first time that you said "I love you" to someone? Remember that long pause while the other person takes in that incredible statement and thinks about how to respond? Even if their answer was immediate it still seemed like it took forever while you waited and waited.

God understands that fear. He has gone through it with each of us...107 billion times if estimates of how many people have ever lived are actually correct. Imagine God waiting for each of 107 billion people to answer that question and give the longed for answer. Imagine that much hurt when each of us sins and says no.

The second of the four, forgiveness, is a gift that comes from God. He knows that we are all sinners but offers us a path that ultimately leads us to a greater connection with him than would otherwise be possible. Is there anything more amazing than realizing that you could have actually burned the house down...and yet are forgiven?

God is not showing us how to spoil puppies by failing to spank them when they tinkle. He is showing us how to truly love that puppy, spank them when you must and feel bad about it, and then love them anyway and watch them grow into the kind of dog that keeps you warm on the couch during a hockey game or warns you when the smoke detector fails and smoke is rising out of the basement. Yes, the puppy is going to make a mess over and over and the sin will produce

consequences each time, but divine forgiveness sees through all that. It truly forgives. And that forgiveness comes from God and it is a game changer.

The third of the four, faith, is a response to that forgiveness – one that we must choose. When we choose it we grow and change. We have to believe that we are forgiven; that leap of faith is critical.

How many people do you know who cannot forgive themselves even long after God has already forgiven them? They are stuck. They live in the past and cannot break free. They walk around with their heads down and carry the weight of the world on their backs. You can see them all around you. They must have faith to free themselves. But, we can help them find it. Maybe not by standing on a soapbox and shouting. We are Episcopalians after all. But, perhaps by sharing a hug and an invitation to St. John's.

I'm a sailor. I know a lot about sin. That's why God handed this homily to me. Forgiveness is almost too big to accept. I've long since learned that I need to come to church weekly to be reminded that forgiveness is right there waiting, and always has been. I just need to respond to it with faith.

The fourth and final step is "change" - action that flows from forgiveness and faith. Once you really have faith in the forgiveness it's almost impossible not to feel the joy that comes after. We don't come to church to feel good. We come to church to feel God. But, joy is just about the only possible result. And that leads to change.

The head comes up, the weight falls away. We realize that good works make us happy. Not just good as our secular world defines it..., but good as God defines it. Actions that flow from a love of God and a love of our neighbors...even and especially when no one is watching.

Being good as God defines it is more than formulaic. Without God, "good" is really just a secular guess - seeds tossed on a hard path, a sailor following a compass that is close to his pocket knife, a little boy who mistakenly thinks he was forgiven because he will always be forgiven...and will soon be free to play with matches again. Action that is good in God's eye comes from the heart and is a very deep thing. That's why we are asked to do good works in private, hiding one hand from the other while doing it. It is the ultimate "yes" when God says that he loves us.

So that's it. Pretty simple really. When you sin, admit it and seek forgiveness. Have faith that when forgiveness is given, it is real. And, then, try harder the next time.

Sailors know a lot about sin; you can trust me on this one. And don't use matches on the carpet.

Amen