

Epiphany VI
St. Matthew 5:21-37
February 16th, 2020
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

Being Good

Excuses and rationalizations. These are so easy to make. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I didn't mean to hit your car, it was an accident. Normally, I am not a gossip. I didn't know that what I heard about you wasn't true.

I didn't mean can be pretty mean and hurtful to the person on the receiving end. Thinking about the consequences of your actions by putting yourself in the other person's shoes is the beginning of empathy and understanding what you have done. It is the beginning of living the commandments and trying to be a good person.

Most of the time I would like to think of myself as a good person. I want you to think that also. Part of that is effected by my words, and the other part by my actions. Yet within me I carry around the knowledge that I haven't always been a good person and I don't want you to know that. I don't want you to know that because I don't want all that hard work I have put in to convince you I am a good person to go to waste. I am afraid you will walk away if you knew about the bad things that I have done. So I hide them. This is very human. From the very start humans have done this. Remember Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden trying to hide their nakedness from the God who made them, and then God asked, who told you you were naked? This question revealed the far greater sin that they had done by eating of the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Oops. Just like one of those TV episodes of America's dumbest Criminals! "The Stories are true: 'Only the names have been changed to protect the ignorant!" I know I am one of America's dumbest sinners!

Either we try to hide our sins inside of us or we try to lock them away somewhere we hope no one will see or find them. In this electronic age of the Internet, that is becoming harder and harder to do-it is almost impossible. When we try and hide our sins inside us, several things happen that we may experience. First, there is a high cost to hiding away all that suspected darkness because the more we shove it down, the greater the shame, and the embarrassment grows about it inside us. Then there is even the greater anxiety it will be revealed. The guilty feelings grow by the day and sometimes the hour. It becomes an unconscious cancer eating away at us inside us. A very dark, real, life depleting cancer. Second, I remember the words of our Lord, "there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed." [see Luke 8:17: For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.] We all think we can hide those dark parts of us from others, but we are all a lot more transparent than we think we are, and it is easy for the even minimally careful observer to discover.

The other human problem when it comes to sin is rationalization. One of the greatest rationalizations is that some sins are worse than other sins. For example, is it worse to tell a little lie about something like I am the 'best preacher in the Episcopal Church' or to bear false witness against someone? What do you think? Jesus indicates that one is the indication of the other and are equally bad. Why lie in the first place? What's so bad about coming to church and making an offering when you know that someone has an issue with something you have done? What's so bad about calling someone you dislike or hate a bunch of nasty names? Is that worse than attacking them physically? Which is worse, to have an affair with another person or look longingly and lustfully at someone you know and secretly wish you could be with but do nothing about it? What did Jesus say? Which is worse, to kill someone or to harbor great anger against them? What would Jesus say? What is so bad about swearing you will do something? Why is it better to simply say yes or no?

There is great wisdom hidden in these questions for us to discover. God wants us to be good people, and God also knows our hearts and our deeds and our thoughts. When your heart betrays the good you want to be, you must change and cleanse yourself is the message. And that will not always be easy. But I guarantee you, it will be easier than harboring the sins and leaving the guilt stored up and left inside of you.

Being and doing good is more than just following the letter of the law: it is following the spirit of the law. Jesus teaches us the two great commandments to love God and to love your neighbor as your self. We are to be lovers in all situations and, love is the measure by which goodness is realized. That means that when we wonder what we ought to do in any situation, the answer is to figure out what is the most loving thing to do. God knows the intentions of our hearts. If we try to do the most loving thing, though it may be difficult to do, God loves us for being loving in return. The cycle compounds itself in doing good things, just as doing the wrong thing and sinning also compounds itself in more evil deeds.

Every day we are confronted with the choice between doing the right or good thing (I like the latter word better-because I am not always sure what the right thing is to do.) and doing the bad things we may be tempted to do. Case in point:

- Last week in the donut shop when I went in to get a cup of coffee, I ate a sample of a donut called the brownie batter delight. It lived up to its name. I declined to purchase one of them at the time and just walked out with my coffee, struggling to follow my diet and avoid sugar and carbs. Later in the day, the taste of that sample percolated in my mind for the intervening hours and I succumbed to temptation and I bought one, the next time I went in for a coffee. It was delicious. Did I do the right thing? What did my choice say about my heart? The donut was good, but I was not. If I want to be healthy, I need to reduce my weight. If I want to live longer, the goal is the same. But I chose to indulge myself, a pattern of behavior that got me into the fix I am in. I was not loving myself, or the body which God gave to me. ...Love and doing the right thing implies change. Was it just my "small bad" or was it indicative of something larger?

When you really look at what is going on here, it is not as simple as just a small relapse and eating one donut. Perhaps the donut won't do a lot of physical harm, but it did do

spiritual harm. I succumbed to temptation. If I rationalize one thing is ok, why not another? I hear the little devil on my shoulder say, 'What would be wrong with a little ice cream or some other treat tonight? You deserve a reward for all your hard efforts! It isn't as though I am eating as many of them as I used to?' And there's the rub: rationalizing poor or bad choices, selfish choices is easy to do. The answer is a simple no. The strength to say it must come from prayer and be with God's help. Ask and you shall receive, trust me. Is it a terrible, mortal sin? You tell me because it can erode my character and lead to many other sins, and not just sins of diet and culinary self-indulgence.

As I mention mortal sins, I am reminded also of venial sins. The Church in some quarters teaches this. Mortal sins can send you to hell, if unrepented. According to the Roman Catholic Church, a Venial sin is a lesser sin that does not result in completely separating us from God, thus does not lead the sinner to eternal damnation in Hell as an unrepented mortal sin would. This comes from the idea that some sins are not as bad as others, and that some are far worse to commit. No one would debate that murder is one of the worst. What about not honoring your mother and your father?

To me, it seems that all sin is bad. There is no need to grade one worse than the others. All sin puts us at peril and separates us not only from God, but from others. Sin is bad. Period. Choose Good. Try to do the most loving thing. Repent and be healed. Never mind about the judgment at the end of time, we are our most harshest judges. Judge not and you will not be judged. That goes for yourself. Search your heart and you will know the right thing to do. No one is completely good except God. [Luke 18:19- Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good--except God alone.] But being Good is our goal. AMEN