

Obedience and God's Grace

Luke 7:36-8:3

June 17, 2007

I.

A common thread runs through all of our readings today. It's a thread that sometimes is minimized or avoided in the contemporary church. And preachers who do talk about it might do so at the risk of being considered out of touch with the way modern society works.

Today's readings raise the subject of sin. In the Old Testament reading from the Book of Kings we heard about the infamous Jezebel, and just one of her many devious schemes to get whatever she wanted at any cost. No wonder parents don't name their daughters Jezebel.

The reading from Galatians reminds us that we all are sinners whose salvation depends entirely on our faith in Jesus Christ. And the Gospel reading sets forth how through repentance, transformation, and faith we can be forgiven and saved from ourselves.

For postmodern Christians this might not be a popular topic. Many people in the church only want to hear about how God loves and accepts us all without regard to our moral state or our obedience to his will for us. Teachings in Scripture about personal conduct, judgment, and consequences sometimes are set aside in favor of more warm and fuzzy interpretations based on moral relativism. There is a belief in certain segments of the church that modern values should define the church instead of the other way around.

This is not new. In 1937 the prominent theologian H. Richard Niebuhr famously chastised theological liberalism as a belief that "a God without wrath has brought [people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

But this topic does not have to be unpopular. In fact, if we consider it more deeply we can draw comfort and assurance from the teachings of our faith. The nature of sin in our lives does not leave us in a dilemma. We are not without hope. The disease has a cure. There is a foolproof, one hundred percent effective solution to the problem of sin. That solution rests in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who has a central role in our worship each Sunday, and hopefully in our lives during the week.

So today I would like to talk about sin, not that you would feel guilty but that you would feel secure in your faith. When you leave here today I don't want you to think that you heard a fire and brimstone sermon about what happens when we forget about God, but rather a hopeful and promising sermon about what happens when we remember God.

But to do that it is necessary to face the reality that there is sin in our lives or, said another way, we are not always obedient to God's will for us. No matter how hard we try, there will be times when we act in ways that make us realize that we need to seek forgiveness.

II.

A good place to start is with what we mean by sin. You might have heard people say we are born into sin, and then you ask yourself, for example, how a beautiful innocent baby can be a sinner. That type of sin is the original sin that infects humanity because of what happened in the Garden of Eden. But baptism is the antibiotic for that infection. When we are baptized the Holy Spirit enters us, we are sealed as Christ's own forever, and we no longer are subject to the guilt of original sin even though its consequences remain.

But even though the guilt of that long ago original sin departs from us at baptism, the power of sin in today's world remains a stumbling block. And by the power of sin I refer to the ways in

which Satan, who I believe is a real spiritual being and not just a symbol, preys upon our human weaknesses, tantalizes us with plausible lies, and works to separate us from God.

And here I am not talking about robbing banks, selling drugs, or other things that all sensible people reject, whether they are Christians or not. The world's rules are one thing. God's rules can extend to other things. Today I'm talking about the more subtle forms of transgressions.

An example might be the so-called seven deadly sins. While these sins are not found in one place in the Bible under that specific name, they all are condemned at various places in Scripture. For many centuries in the early and medieval church they were part of the liturgy. At one time the Archbishop of Canterbury required Anglican priests to preach four times a year on these seven examples of disobedience of God's will.

So, what are these sins? They cover the entire scope human conduct. Traditionally, they are pride (letting our egos get the best of us), envy (a false sense of entitlement), wrath (anger, abuse, and hatred), sloth (laziness in our work or spirituality), greed (wanting more for ourselves at the expense of others), gluttony (my personal favorite, which can be addictions and other things that harm our bodies), and lust (which has many synonyms).

When we act in these ways we sin, even though we do nothing illegal. When we are prideful, or envious, or greedy, or lustful, for example, we are being disobedient to God's will. That is one of the ways the Catechism of the Church defines sin. Look at page 848 of the Book of Common Prayer and you will see sin described as "seeking our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God." That goes even beyond these seven iniquities.

III.

With that background on what we mean by sin, let's look at how it works in our lives. Recognizing that we sin by being disobedient, it usually happens in one of two ways. It can start slowly and grow, or it can be a small thing that remains small but still corrupts. The frog can be an example of the first, and the fly an example of the second.

I have been told that if you drop a frog into a pot of boiling water it immediately will jump out. But if you put the frog in a pot of cold water and gradually turn the heat up to boiling, the frog will remain in the pot and eventually die.

Temptations operate in a similar way. Obviously, if Satan tried to get you to do something really bad right away you, like the frog, probably wouldn't sit still for it. But if it starts with just a little thing, that leads to another thing, which gives rise to even more mischief, then it can be like the slow-cooked frog. Before we come to realize it we are in really hot water.

The fly represents the little things. Suppose a fly lands in your bowl of soup. That fly's body mass is a mere fraction of the entire quantity of soup in the bowl. The fly might only count for one one-thousandth of a percent of what is in the bowl. And you might even flick the fly out and the soup would look exactly the same as it did before the fly arrived. But you would know that the fly had been there, and you would know that the fly has corrupted the entire bowl.

Small transgressions are the same way. They are acts of disobedience just like bigger ones. They might not seem as serious, and perhaps they are not, but they corrupt nonetheless, and if they are not dealt with they add up and eventually, as the Catechism tells us, will distort our relationship with God.

And we know that we all are susceptible to temptation and sin. Paul said in 1 Cor. 10:13 "no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone." In Romans 3:10-12 he said "there is no one who [always] is righteous, not even one." And in 1 John 1:8 we are told that "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

I think we all have to acknowledge that in some way or another, on a somewhat consistent basis, there are transgressions in our lives that we must acknowledge and for which we must repent if we are to live Christian lives in God's will. That certainly applies to me, and in some ways even writing and delivering a sermon on sin can seem hypocritical because I also cannot always do what God wants me to do.

That's why we celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday. In the liturgy we confess our sins, exchange the peace, and begin the Eucharistic prayer. This is not just an empty ritual. I am not up here just reciting words. Things actually happen in our spiritual lives during this time even though they are not visible.

Forgiveness and absolution are large parts of why we share in the presence of Christ here at the communion rail. In this way we acknowledge that we have not always been obedient whether our sins are big or small, or one of the seven deadly sins or something else. But whatever they are, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we are forgiven over and over again, each Sunday we come here, because there is nothing we can do on our own, in our own strength, to claim God's favor. Only through Jesus Christ will we be able to stand in God's presence.

But that does not mean we don't have to make an effort to live Christian lives. Through the Holy Spirit we are called to not only know God's will for us, but also to do it. Even though a basic principle of the Gospel tells us that no one is completely worthy, we cannot make the mistake of just doing whatever we want and then coming to church each Sunday to get ourselves cleaned up for the coming week.

We know that we are justified before God the moment we accept Jesus Christ, but it does not end there. God wants us to live lives that through his grace will produce less and less of the acts of sin and disobedience, and more and more of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We continually try to be more like Jesus Christ, even though we know that in this world we never will completely get to that point.

The story of the apostle Peter has stood through the centuries as an example to us all. Peter was a believer, a follower and disciple of the Lord. His devotion and commitment to Jesus is apparent from all the Gospels. Yet Peter denied our Lord, three times, and thought he was lost. But he was not, he was forgiven, and became the rock on which the church was built.

We can be forgiven and reunited with God in the same way. We can deny Jesus, once, three times, or a hundred times. It makes no difference other than the guilt we feel, like Peter felt, until reconciliation occurs. We are always asked to follow Jesus no matter where we are in our lives or what we have done. For God it is never too late to put our old life behind us and live a new life in Christ.

IV.

So we have something to do, and we do it in through prayer, the study of Scripture, worship, and Christian fellowship with each other. But we should never be tempted into believing that we actually are becoming more holy, because then the sin of pride will overtake us. The dilemma thus is apparent, and it confirms what I said earlier. In the moment that we think we are worthy, we will have proven by that very thought that we are not.

It is really God's love and God's grace, which we experience in forgiveness through Jesus Christ, that enables us to be transformed into a new person. That new person still will continue to act in disobedient ways, but through God's love and grace those old ways will begin to pass into obscurity as our lives can be fulfilled and enriched by our new life in Jesus Christ. *Amen.*