

**Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Twelfth Sunday After Trinity**

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.

“. . . Say not thou, It is through the Lord that I fell away: for thou oughtest not to do the things that he hateth. Say not thou, He hath caused me to err: for he hath no need of the sinful man. The Lord hateth all abomination; and they that fear God love it not. He himself made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his counsel; If thou wilt, to keep the commandments, and to perform acceptable faithfulness. He hath set fire and water before thee: stretch forth thy hand unto whether thou wilt. Before man is life and death; and whether him liketh shall be given him. For the wisdom of the Lord is great, and he is mighty in power, and beholdeth all things: And his eyes are upon them that fear him, and he knoweth every work of man. He hath commanded no man to do wickedly, neither hath he given any man licence to sin.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the second Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Philippians.

“. . . Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain. Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all. For the same cause also do ye joy, and rejoice with me.

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[W]ork out your own salvation with fear and trembling. . .” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Some of you may be old enough to recall Flip Wilson, the comedian whose act featured his being caught in some transgression which he then tried to excuse by rolling his eyes and saying, in a knowing tone, “The Devil made me do it.”

Even the most theologically unsophisticated members of his audience knew how hollow was that claim, because the Devil cannot *make* us do anything; he can only *tempt* us, hoping we will use our own powers to do as he wishes. And we all should have learned in our confirmation classes and other early instruction in the Church that not only does the Devil have no power over us other than the power of suggestion, but that God has given us the graces of the Sacraments precisely to strengthen our powers of resistance.

Theme:

But there would be no struggle between God and the Devil for our allegiance had God not first given us the power of “free will”, that is, the power to choose what we will do even when we exercise that choice in ways that disappoint God and run contrary to His wishes for us.

Why He would have given us that freedom, the freedom even to reject Him, is a great mystery, one to which many thinkers have given much thought. But while we may not now why we are endowed with this power of independent choice, we may be assured that we have been.

Development:

1. For better or for worse, God has given us the power of a free will. Thus we have the ability to reject His directives to us and therefore to sin.

This may be a bit clearer if we reconsider some of the words of today’s First Lesson, this time in a more contemporary translation:

“It was he who created man in the beginning,
and he left him in the power of his own inclination.

If you will, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own
choice.

He has placed before you fire and water:
stretch out your hand for whichever you
wish.”

Today, we are surrounded by people who reject the Church’s immemorial lessons about the nature of men and women and about the conduct that God has laid down as proper for us. One of the principal arguments these people use to question traditional moral teachings is to say, particularly with regard to deviant sexual impulses, “I want to do these things! And God made me, so God must have made me to want these things! Therefore, it is ‘natural’ for me to want them, even if for three and a half millennia, all Jews and Christians knew they are wrong!”

Arguing from person inclinations is, of course, a great fallacy because we tend to be over-persuaded when we have a personal stake in the outcome of the argument. And this fallacy is especially powerful, and seemingly persuasive, when the object of the argument is to justify something that gives us pleasure. I suppose one could look at that as a sort of built-in conflict of interest: we are not to be trusted to make impartial choices when one potential choice brings us great pleasure and the other potential choice makes us feel deprived.

Those who argue from hedonism that traditional morality is “unnatural” are wrong. Their error is that they misidentify what it is that God has implanted within us. He has given us free will, which means we always have the capacity to choose what gives us pleasure or satisfaction over that which gives Him pleasure and satisfaction.

So, in a twisted way, deviant conduct is “natural”, but then so are polio and scarlet fever. The “naturalness” of those diseases does not prevent us from having our children vaccinated and the notional “naturalness” of moral misconduct should not

prevent us from teaching our children that it is wrong, destructive of human lives and offensive to God.

2. Although we have the ability to choose against God's desires, and therefore to sin, that is not what He wishes for us.

Again, in a more contemporary version of the words of today's First Lesson:

“Do not say, ‘Because of the Lord I left the right
way’;
for he will not do what he hates.

Do not say, ‘It was he who led me astray’;
for he has no need of a sinful man.

The Lord hates all abominations,
and they are not loved by those who fear him.

. . .

He has not commanded any one to be ungodly,
and he has not given anyone permission to
sin”

This is the answer to those who go where even Flip Wilson feared to tread and say, “God made me do it!”

God has given us free will which, when misused, gives us the power to sin. Giving us that power, however, is not quite the same thing as wishing us to use it improperly. On the contrary, God gave us the power of free will in hopes that we would use it, not to undermine our relationship with Him, and certainly not to deny our relationship with Him, but instead to choose to deepen and strengthen our relationship with Him.

In the words of today's Second Lesson, “God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

3. If we choose sin over God, that is our own personal responsibility, not His.

Returning to our First Lesson, we read:

“If you will, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own
choice.

He has placed before you fire and water:
stretch out your hand for whichever you wish.

Before a man are life and death,
and whichever he chooses will be given to
him.”

That is the scary side of free will. If we have the freedom to choose to follow God or to reject God, then it must follow that we are personally responsible for the choice we make. This has two serious consequences that we must always bear in mind if we are to make intelligent choices about our conduct toward Him.

The first of these consequences is that sin is, at bottom, simply that which separates us from God. We cannot disobey God’s commands to us and expect the result of that disobedience will be to strengthen our relationship with Him.

On the contrary, as everyone knows who has ever lived in a family, gone to a school, or worked in an organization, at a minimum disobedience always strains our relationship with the one we are disobeying. If we persist in our disobedience, then eventually it must make that relationship impossible and so terminate it.

The second of these consequences is that, since God has given us free will and has permitted us to live with the consequences of our choices, if we choose to reject Him, we will live without Him. Remember these words: “Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him.”

We have been given remarkably little reliable information about the actual nature of Heaven and Hell. Most of what we have is more literary speculation than fact, but of one thing we can be absolutely sure: Heaven involves living forever in the presence of God and Hell involves living forever excluded from His presence.

If, as we are told in today's First Lesson, whatever we choose will be given to us, then it is only natural that when we choose to separate ourselves from God, we will live in separation from Him. If you think about it, once that happened, any further punishment we might endure would be simply irrelevant.

Conclusion:

So what is our task, once we wake up to the fact that, quite literally for good or for ill, we have been endowed by our Creator with free will? Our task is, in concept, quite easy and in execution excruciatingly difficult. It is to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling..."

Given the eternal consequences of our choices, to live in fellowship with God or to live in complete separation from Him, it is only natural and sensible that we should approach those prospects with fear and trembling. To work out our own salvation is, in the most literal fashion possible, our life's work.

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August 30, 2009.*

*1 Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943),
THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxii
(PECUSA 1928/1943).*

2 Ecclesiasticus 15:11-20 (KJV).

3 Philippians 2:12-18 (KJV).

4 Philippians 2:12b (KJV).

5 Sirach 15:14-16 (RSV).

6 Sirach 15:11-14 and 20 (RSV).

7 Philippians 2:13 (RSV).

8 Sirach 15:15-17 (RSV).

9 Sirach 15:17 (RSV).

10 Philippians 2:12b (RSV).

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