

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Chapter of The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.ⁱⁱ

“Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me, and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of Man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling block of iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them? Therefore speak unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols.

“Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn *yourselves* from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to inquire of him concerning me; I the Lord will answer him by myself: And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh *unto him*; that the house of Israel may go no more astray from me, neither be polluted any more with all their transgressions; but that they may be my people, and I may be their God, saith the Lord God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the First Epistle of the Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort *you* by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, *so* ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we Give you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no *man* go beyond and defraud his brother in *any* matter: because that the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and *that* ye may have lack of nothing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, . . . and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, . . . I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I *am* the Lord.”^{iv} In the Na~~m~~e of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Two of the most fundamental concepts in Christianity are the reality of human sin and the equal reality of divine forgiveness. That human sinfulness, in turn, has two aspects to which sermons, and all the other teaching that the Church conducts, ought regularly to consider. These two aspects are, first, the general inborn tendency of all human beings to sin; that tendency is what we call “Original Sin” for its inborn character makes it contemporaneous with the origin of our species.^v The second aspect is that of the actual conduct of human beings that springs from that innate tendency, that is, that occurs when we allow ourselves to act in the ways to which that tendency prompts us. It is such disobedient conduct that we call “Actual Sin”.^{vi}

Because these concepts are absolutely fundamental to the Christian understanding of what it means to be human, they once were regular topics for preachers in the Church, Sunday by Sunday throughout the year. Indeed, in Calvinist churches not more than a generation or two ago, many worshippers may very seldom have heard a sermon on any other topic.

In contrast, most preachers today feel some reluctance to preach about sin, perhaps because doing so has a tendency to convict the preacher of hypocrisy. Every preacher who is in the least honest with himself must be deeply conscious of being a sinner, which makes it hard to address other people on the subject of their sins. However, just because a necessary task is hard, that is no reason for not attempting to do it.

Theme:

The essence of sin, in its nature, in its effects, and in its punishment, is *separation from God*.

Development:

The whole purpose of human life is to draw as close to God as it is superhumanly possible to do.^{vii} Please note that I said “super-humanly” because, for the Christian, it is not enough just to try to come as close to God as is *humanly* possible: that would leave us still much farther away

than we wish to be. That is why God, in His goodness, has made available to us *supernatural* help, that is, help that is beyond what is merely natural, in the form of His *Grace*.

This “Grace” is actually the presence of God with us, and with His presence and aid we are able to do *better* than we would be able to do on our own.^{viii} Thus our efforts, when aided by this Grace of God, are, in the most literal sense, *super*-human, that is, they surpass mere human efforts.

Once we understand that our whole purpose as human beings is to draw as close to God as it is possible to come, we can see how terrible it is when something obstructs us from moving closer to Him. Our journey towards Him is already so difficult that we do not need any new and additional obstacles in our way. How much worse is it, then, when something does not merely block our forward progress but, instead, actually pulls us back, takes us farther away from Him, undoing whatever progress we have at great cost made in moving closer to Him.

This is what sin does to us: it blocks our progress toward God and, in the case of serious sins, it actually pulls us back, moving us farther away from His presence.

1. The essential nature of sin is that which separates us from God.

The first thing we need to know about sin is that it is what separates us from God. Sin consists of disobeying God’s will for and commands to us and it is that disobedience that erects a barrier between Him and us. People tend to think of any concept that has a name as being a “thing”, and this is also true of sin. Because sin has a name, people tend to treat it as a physical reality, like a rock in the path over which we trip. That is not strictly true, however.

Actually, sin is not a *thing* but instead is a *state* or *condition* of being. What distinguishes sin from other conditions in life, or in our activities, is that sin is the state of being removed from God or, in the case of our actions, is the condition in those actions that impedes our progress towards God or moves us farther from Him. Thus the acts that

are commonly called “sins” are really those human acts which, by their nature, have one or both of those effects. They make it more difficult for us to approach God or they remove us farther from God’s presence.

This is the reason that, in today’s First Lesson, God says that people in a state of sin, that is, people who have impeded themselves from approaching him, should not seek to learn what is His will for them. In Old Testament times, the way to seek to learn His will was to ask a prophet to ask God on one’s behalf, but God tells them – and us – that to do so in a state of sin will only lead to hearing bad news: “[T]hese men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them?”^{ix}

2. The effect of sin is to separate us from God.

It should be no surprise that, when people do things that, by their nature, tend to separate them from God, then the result of those actions is, indeed, to separate them from God. This conclusion, after all, is not much more than a matter of restating the same thought or definition in different words that mean essentially the same thing.

In today’s First Lesson, God says of the sinners among the people of Israel, “[T]hey are all estranged from me through their idols”.^x In this context, “idols” are all those things which they – and we – value above their – and our – relationship with God. When they put the highest value on things that, by their nature, will separate them from God, then by that act alone they are deciding that being closer to God is simply not a very valuable state in which to be. Once they have made that decision, is it any wonder that God takes that choice at face value and leaves them to enjoy whatever it is that they find more important than they find Him?

3. The punishment for sin is separation from God.

That is the really insidious thing about sin. It is not so much that God punishes us by pulling Himself away from us, it is that we choose to distance ourselves from God and He merely lets us have what we have chosen.

If we persist in serious sin throughout our entire lives, and the nature and effect of that sin is to separate us from God, then it seems reasonable to conclude that at the end of those lives, when He determines what will be our fate for the rest of eternity, that fate will be to continue in separation from God. Scripture does not tell us the precise nature of what we call “Hell”, although it does make clear that it is not a pleasant place in which to be.^{xi} However, there is strong reason to believe that the true nature of Hell is simply the state of living completely separate and apart from God, which is the ultimate emptiness.

Can you even begin to imagine how truly awful that would be? Think, now: everything that is good about living and being human comes from God and reflects God. Therefore, to live in complete separation from God would be to live without *anything*, and I do mean without *anything*, that is in any way good.

Just imagine for yourself what that means. Eternity is, by definition, endless. Therefore life in Hell means, at an absolute minimum, a life that goes on forever, with every moment completely devoid of anything good, of anything satisfying, of anything reassuring. This is a life of permanent loneliness and despair, where if there is any companionship, it is only the company of similarly lost souls. Human terms are completely inadequate to express that but it would have to be something like an endless bout of depression where there is no possibility of Prozac.

The theologians who suggest that this is the true nature of Hell differ over whether the lost souls end up in that state because God simply lets them have what they have chosen, that is, lets them choose to be separated from Him, or whether by their persistence in sin they have so damaged themselves that they are no longer capable of being near Him. It is a distinction that has no more than an academic difference: what is critical for the Christian to know is not *how* a life devoted to sin results in our being lost, but rather that such a life *will* result in our being lost.

To put that in everyday terms, most of us get through life very satisfactorily without ever knowing precisely how the passage of

electrical currents through human tissue disrupts the biology of human cells. Outside of a few specialized scientists, it is enough for the rest of us to know that if we stick our fingers into a light socket, we will get a nasty, and very possibly dangerous, shock.

Conclusion:

Obviously, the best answer to the problem of sin is to avoid it in the first place. We should perform that avoidance maneuver every time we are tempted and, if we are successful, the entire issue of the nature and effects of sin will never arise. Most of us, however, are only very partially successful – many of us are not even successful very much of the time – in avoiding those acts and conditions that constitute sin.

What are we to do, then, when we have not avoided successfully but instead have fallen into sin? The answer for those sins we do commit is to *repent* of them. Thus God tells the erring Israelites: “Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations.”^{xii} True repentance brings God’s forgiveness.^{xiii}

If we can only remember that, and if we can only repent, truly and heartily, those times and acts in which we have fallen short of God’s commandments to us, then our separation from God will be healed. The result of that will be for us, as God said it would be for the repentant Israelites of old, “That the house of Israel may go no more astray from me, neither be polluted any more with all their transgressions; but that they may be my people, and I may be their God, saith the Lord God.”^{xiv}

--oo0oo--

The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister JD^{xv}

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Ezekiel 14:1-11 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *I Thessalonians 4:1-12 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Ezekiel 14:7-8 (KJV).*

^v *See, e.g., Article 9, “Of Original or Birth-Sin”, The Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{vi} *See, e.g., Article 16, “Of Sin after Baptism”, The Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{vii} *This ultimate goal of closeness to God is well expressed in the Church’s teaching on the duty of a Christian:*

“Question: What is thy duty towards God?

“Answer: My duty towards God is To believe in him, to fear him, And to love him with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength: To worship him, to give him thanks: To put my whole trust in him, to call upon him: To honour his holy Name and his Word: and to serve him truly all the days of my life.”

A Catechism, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 579 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

^{viii} *See, e.g., Article 10, “Of Free-Will”, The Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604-05 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{ix} *Ezekiel 14:2 (KJV).*

^x *Ezekiel 14:5 (KJV).*

^{xi} *One rather general reference to “unquenchable fire” as punishment is reported at St. Matthew 3: 12 and St. Luke 3: 17, and another somewhat more direct reference to it as “hell fire” is recorded at St. Matthew 25: 41 and St. Mark 9: 43-49. However, in the contexts of these remarks, they may well have been intended more to indicate in a vivid image the overall unpleasantness of eternal punishment than to convey precise information about the mechanism by which that punishment is inflicted.*

^{xii} *Ezekiel 14:6 (KJV).*

^{xiii} *“Scripture moveth us, in sundry places, to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father; but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart; to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same, by his infinite goodness and mercy.”*

The Orders for Daily Morning and Evening Prayer, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 5-6 and 23 (PECUSA 1928), rev. 1943 (emphasis supplied). And,

“Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live, hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins.”

Id. at 7 and 24 (emphasis supplied).

^{xiv} *Ezekiel 14:11 (KJV).*

^{xv} *Curate, St. Mary’s Anglican Catholic Church, Akron, Ohio.*