

“God Be Merciful To Me, A Sinner”

- I. Introduction: There Jesus goes again, turning things upside down and inside out, right before our very eyes! Jesus did that all the time. Look at what he said at the conclusion of today’s Gospel: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus is constantly helping us see ourselves and others in new ways.
- II. Sin. This week I have been praying about what to preach in today’s sermon. The word that has come to me over and over again is “sin.” God and I have had some conversations about preaching on sin. I have politely tried to reject that theme. “Lord, sin doesn’t go over very well; sin doesn’t sell.” Well actually, it does, and that’s the problem. But the word “sin” kept coming to me over and over again. “Well, how about the topic of stewardship? We’re right in the middle of our Ascension pledge drive and we’re trying to get this penguin up to the top of the mountain.” But God took care of that; God sent us a Gospel lesson where the righteous Pharisee who gave one tenth of his income to the temple was used as a negative example in one of Jesus’ parables. Jesus held up the other fellow, a tax collector, as a role model. Tax collectors were known to be very dishonest in Israel at the time of Jesus. They not only collected money for the hated Romans, but they added to the taxes required for personal gain. Tax collectors were generally despised. Yet in Jesus’ story, the tax collector, the remorseful man, was “justified” or forgiven by God while the Pharisee, the self-righteous man was sinning.
- III. Why the reversal? In this parable, Jesus reversed the expected role of the righteous Pharisee and the despised tax collector in order to make his point clearly – we often do not see the nature of our own sin. In this parable, the Pharisee had become sufficient unto himself and did not see that even, as he prayed, he was placing himself in God’s position of judge. In the Pharisee’s self-righteousness there was no place for God. He was sinning even as he was praying. When we self-righteously judge others, we run the risk of becoming hard-hearted and blaming. Herein lies the first point about sin. When you or I presume to judge others for their behavior or their opinions we are on a sinful path. We are putting ourselves in God’s place. It is a human temptation that many of us struggle with quite a bit.

And we experience this form of sin in the church. Often we are tempted to label one another and then act toward one another as if that label was the other person. We can label one another as conservative or liberal, as moderate or extremist, or even as the true versus the untrue followers of Christ. I urge us in this time of polarization in our culture and in our church not to fall prey to this sin. It divides us from one another and weakens us as the Body of Christ.

- IV. This parable not only reminds us that it is sinful to judge others, but it reminds us of the importance of examining ourselves. There are many ways that we fall short of being the kind of people that God created us to be. This is part of our humanness. But our shortcomings and sin interfere with our ability to live the full Christian experience of a new life. Therefore, we need to regularly recognize and repent of our sin. You may have noticed that we pause before we pray the confession each Sunday. This is to give each one of us the opportunity to reflect on the specific ways we have fallen short, to ask for God's forgiveness of these specific sins, and to ask for God's support as we try to change. And we do this before the Eucharist because it allows us to experience Christ's presence more fully in the sacrament.

Let's look together at the Confession in our service bulletin: "We pray to you also for the forgiveness of our sins.

Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; in your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things done and left undone; and so uphold us by your spirit—that we may live and serve you in newness of life, to the honor and glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Worship is a wonderful time in which to reflect upon, identify, and wrestle with our own shortcomings and a wonderful place to ask God's help to fully become the loving and caring people we can be. I don't believe that encounters with Jesus Christ in worship and in the Eucharist should be thought of as times of fear and trembling. I do not believe that our faith is based on fear and punishment and anger. But I do believe that each of us needs to take a good look at ourselves through the eyes of God and be open with ourselves and with God about what we see.

I'd like to share one such meaningful encounter with Christ that I had at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, IN. This is the church where Peg and I were confirmed and became Episcopalians. I was reminded of this experience as I prepared today's sermon. Early during the period of time we worshipped at St. Paul's I was going through a particularly difficult time in my life. I was troubled by certain decisions I'd made, and I was trying to sort out not only what had happened in my past, but what my future should hold as well. Before the Eucharist one Sunday, I knelt and prayed and, as I was accustomed to do, I asked God for guidance. As I sat back in the pew I looked at the front of the church and saw written over the arch of the

chancel the words “Your sins are forgiven you, go and sin no more.” In a way that was extremely real, powerful, and clear, I had at that moment the experience of being known by Jesus Christ. I had seen those words on that wall countless times before, but on that Sunday morning the words were new because they were being spoken to me. I needed God’s help at that time in my life, I prayed for guidance, and I received it. Jesus Christ was present. From that encounter, I knew that I had sinned, that I was forgiven, and that I was to go on with my life as a changed person. Such encounters with Jesus transform us.

- V. Conclusion. My brothers and sisters in Christ, I grew up in a religious tradition with a very highly defined and legalistic way of thinking about sin. Many of you did as well. When I went away to college I rejected this notion of heavy-duty sin and judgment. But it was not until I re-examined the whole notion of sin in the Episcopal church and in seminary that I began to understand that God’s love and forgiveness is the overpowering foundation of Christianity. God loves us so very much that there is not anything – anything – that God cannot forgive and transform when we ask for God’s mercy. So today with great gratitude with the tax collector I pray, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” Amen.