

SERMON
3 SEPTEMBER 2017

ROMANS 12: 9 – 21
MATTHEW 16: 21 – 28

IN THE NAME OF GOD, FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

I would like to say a few words about sin. It's bad.

Since I retired I haven't had many opportunities to talk about sin. People used to tell me about sin a lot but that doesn't happen much anymore. It's not the sort of topic in casual conversation – certainly not at the dinner table.

Actually, I haven't had many opportunities to give a sermon, either, so when I read this morning's lessons, particularly Paul's Letter to the Romans, the topic seemed to be a natural.

I think we all know what sin is. Sin is "separation from God." It's what God tells us "Don't do that." For our convenience, the details are to be found in the Decalogue on page 318 of the Book of Common Prayer; we all say them in Lent when we use Rite One.

Generally speaking, I think you and I do a pretty good job of following them. Personally, I really haven't any other Gods, I don't take God's name in vain, and you and I do keep the Sabbath Day holy, that's why we're here, isn't it?

I haven't killed anyone, I haven't committed adultery, stolen anything, or told lies and I really don't covet things, much. As for honoring my father and mother, I believe I did that when they were ill and I became a parent to them after they had been parents to me.

Of course we know that the reason we have done a good job is the presence of Jesus Christ in our life and the strength that God gives us in this world filled with temptations

There are only ten commandments, all that Moses brought down from God on Mount Sinai. Israel had added many, many more by the time of Jesus.

Then Christians added a few. In the year 590 AD, recognizing that ten seemed too few, the Roman Catholic church added seven sins to the list; they called them “deadly;” such things as Lust, Greed, Sloth, Gluttony, and Envy.

In that list we also find Pride and Wrath. Those are what this morning’s readings are about.

Of course the two are related; Wrath is the desire for revenge. It comes from Pride. If we are willing to admit it, we all have a bit of pride in us. We have a good self-image; we want to be taken seriously and to be respected. We do enjoy some recognition for what we do in life. Is that not true?

Do we know when we aren’t receiving respect and recognition? We certainly do. Worse, do we remember every time in the past when we haven’t received respect and recognition? Am I the only one with those memories? The problem is compounded when we close our eyes and see the faces of a lifetime of irritating people, all of whom have long ago vanished from our lives. I remember the bully on the playground at Patrick Henry Elementary School in Chicago around 1945. Why do I remember him? That’s pride; pure wounded pride.

That is what Paul is addressing in this Letter to the Romans. Paul was writing no later than 58 AD, twenty years after the Resurrection, to a very young community of Christian converts that was struggling with its identity, struggling with the question of how should Christians behave? This was a new world for a group of converts who had been pagans quite recently.

The Christians of Rome believed in a God and in a life that was the very antithesis of the Roman world. They lived at the center of pagan Roman culture, a culture in which cruelty and persecution were officially honored.

Paul told them to “Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” It was a call to live apart from that culture and to have faith in the God of Jesus Christ. That’s not bad advice for us today.

It was a quantum leap to the idea of blessing someone who persecuted them, to have the courage to bless them rather than curse them. Humility and meekness were a new world for those Christians.

They were called to “overcome evil with good,” to never avenge themselves but to leave room for the wrath of God; to have faith that the God they worshiped would triumph over all.

The call is to love and charity, not just to their fellow Christians but to the pagans next door and to the pagan priests and soldiers in whose midst they lived.

You know, of course, that that is our call too. Have you ever attended a church as a stranger or a passerby, perhaps on a vacation, dropping in for a Sunday service? Have you ever been completely ignored? For that church you were a pagan without the benefit of Paul’s admonition.

Sometimes that happens to clergy too. Some years ago a classmate from seminary served one Sunday as substitute priest in a small church in a small town in Alabama; he was the Episcopal Chaplain for Auburn at the time. He said that at the coffee hour following the service absolutely nobody talked to him.

In reading these lessons I was reminded of the traditional Call to Confession in Rite 1. Actually it is the same as in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. Actually, the words had changed very little since the first prayer book in 1549. The words were important then and important now and have been important since 58 AD.

The words answer the question of that early community of Christians in Rome. They tell us how a Christian is to behave. They are:

“Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbor, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in His holy ways; Draw near with faith and make your humble confession to Almighty God, devoutly kneeling.’

IN HIS HOLY NAME.