

Baptism Series #2: Reconciliation with God has been taken care of, now we must reconcile with our neighbors

Sunday, Jan. 14, 2017

Second Sunday After the Epiphany

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

The Reverend Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

Sermon Text(s): Baptismal Covenant Question #2, Psalm 139, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

As I mentioned last week, between now and the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday next month, I'm going to be doing a sermon series on the vows of our Baptismal Covenant. I won't necessarily be going in the same order that the questions appear in the prayer book, because I have tried to pair them with the lectionary readings in such a way that the scriptures we hear each week will relate to the topic of the question we're considering. Today, we'll be looking at the second question in the Baptismal Covenant:

"Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

Notice that the question does not say IF you fall into sin, but WHEN. The Baptismal Covenant does not expect perfection from us, because God knows that we are flawed human beings and we will mess up from time to time. That in and of itself does not violate our baptismal vow. What does violate it is if we mess up and refuse to acknowledge it and apologize, if we don't "repent and return to the Lord."

Our psalm for today reminds us that there's no hiding from God, so refusing to own up to our sins is futile, at least in our relationship with God. The psalmist writes,

“LORD, you have searched me out and known
me... there is not a word on my lips,
but you, O LORD, know it altogether.”
(Ps. 139:1, 3)

God “knit us together in our mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:12), the psalmist reminds us. God knows us intimately: every bone in our bodies, every hair on our heads, and all our thoughts, desires, actions, and motivations.

That can be a scary thought, to really think about the implications of God knowing us that completely. Because that means all our sins, all our failures and foibles, everything about ourselves of which we’re ashamed or embarrassed are all exposed. Every uncharitable thought, every mean word or action we’ve ever said or done – God knows them all.

It is a natural human tendency, given this realization, to want to try to “make amends” to God for all the wrongs we have done in the same way we try to make amends to other people when we hurt them. After all, isn’t that what we vow to do when we say we will “repent and return to the Lord” when we sin? But while it’s a good thing to try to “make amends” to other people when we hurt them, if we spend too much of our spiritual lives trying to “make

amends” to God for all the things we’ve done wrong, it can lead us to an unhealthy place, sinking into shame and despair. Because the fact of the matter is, we’re going to keep messing up, we’ll keep falling short, and we’ll never really be able to fix it.

But the good news is, we don’t have to! God doesn’t expect us to fix it. God knows we will never be perfect, and God accepts us anyway. That’s the amazing, incredibly good news of the Gospel.

Remember in stewardship season when we talked about how we can never really “give back to God?” Well, it is also true that we can never really “make amends” to God. What could we possibly do that would “make up for” all the ways we have fallen short of God’s intentions for us?

A lot of religious practice, both Christian and non-Christian, tends to get caught up in this idea of paying God back or making amends to God. The ancients offered sacrifices as a way to appease an angry God: “We know we messed up, so here, have a nice burnt offering – and please don’t hurt us!” That’s not the way most of us think of God now, as an angry deity just waiting to destroy us unless we offer him the right gifts. But even if we did understand God that way, Christian theology historically has taught that Jesus’s death on the cross was a sufficient offering for the sins of the whole world! When he said “it is finished” as he died on the cross, he meant it. We are forgiven. We don’t have to do anything else to earn God’s favor.

That is the heart of the Christian message – we are forgiven, not due to anything we have done, but as a gift of pure grace – completely undeserved, unearned mercy shown by God to us. When we truly understand the truth of that grace, it frees us, it allows us to live without fear or shame before God because we know we are accepted unconditionally, that God will always forgive us, no matter what.

Such an incredible message can be dangerous in a world where we tend to make our decisions based on avoiding negative consequences. If there is no threat of negative consequences, what is there to motivate us to keep doing right? If God will forgive us anyway, let's all just go out tonight and sin as much as we can and go to confession in the morning to have it all wiped away! The Apostle Paul specifically condemned this kind of spiritual “cheating” in his letter to the Romans, when he says, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!” (Romans 6:1-2) Just because imperfection is expected is not a license to embrace it!

Being assured of unconditional forgiveness allows us to make decisions based on love instead of fear. We are encouraged to make behavior choices based on how our actions will affect others rather than out of any threat of punishment.

Our passage from 1 Corinthians today shows Paul responding to another situation where grace had been

misunderstood. “God forgives me no matter what?” said the people of ancient Corinth. “Oh great, so nothing’s off limits. Let’s go on down to the local Greek temple and have a little fun with one of the temple prostitutes!”

Paul responds to this twisting of the message of grace with a call to consider the effects of one’s actions on others. Yes, “all things are lawful for me,” he concedes – Christians are not bound by a legal code that tells them what they can and cannot do – “but not all things are beneficial.” Yes, technically you are free to do whatever you want, knowing that God offers you unconditional acceptance, but is abusing that freedom really beneficial – to you, to your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, and to society at large?

A high school graduate moving out on her own after years of strict oversight by parents might decide she wants to eat pizza and ice cream for every meal just because she can, but though such a choice is now “lawful” for her because she’s no longer under the “law” of her parents’ household, it doesn’t necessarily mean that it is beneficial.

Paul wisely advised communities of new Christians who took their newfound freedom to an extreme that the knowledge of God’s unconditional forgiveness meant that repentance and reconciliation wasn’t primarily a matter between them and God anymore, but a matter between them and other people.

Thus, our vow to “repent and return to the Lord” in our baptismal covenant is not really so much a vow to always

work to make things right with God – that has already been done through the work of Jesus Christ – but a vow to work to make things right with our neighbor. Knowing that God forgives us for anything and everything we have done allows us to begin to work toward forgiving others. Grounding ourselves in the knowledge of God’s radical abundant grace frees us and compels us to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Our liturgy echoes this movement from a vertical focus to a horizontal focus on repentance and reconciliation when, after hearing the absolution, we move directly into sharing the peace with others. Sharing the peace is a symbol of being reconciled with our neighbor before receiving communion, since Jesus taught that

“when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24).

After being assured that God has forgiven us, we are able to turn to our neighbor and forgive them.

There is an absolution in the New Zealand Prayer Book that captures the spirit of this movement in our liturgy poignantly and succinctly. After the confession of sin, the priest stands and says to the congregation:

“God forgives you. Forgive others, forgive yourself.”

It is through fully coming to understand that **God forgives you** that you can begin to forgive others and yourself.

The absolution continues,

“Through Christ, God has put away your sins. Approach your God in peace.”

This wording reminds us that the priest is not forgiving you, but is merely reminding you that God has already forgiven you through Jesus Christ, before you were even born. You are free. Free to approach God in peace, without fear of retribution. Free to approach your brothers and sisters secure in the knowledge of your own acceptance and forgiveness and therefore free to offer them your forgiveness.

We “approach our God in peace” by approaching one another in peace, being reconciled with one another, and then coming together to share the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ “given for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins.”

Repentance, reconciliation and return. We rehearse these steps every week in the structure of our worship, practicing what it means to **"persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord."**

God forgives you. Forgive others, forgive yourself.

