

Repentance Leading to Forgiveness

For today's Gospel reading we go to the Luke's Gospel account for a Resurrection story. The context for today's reading is that it is the evening of the first Easter Sunday. Jesus had appeared to the disciples traveling the road to Emmaus and those disciples had returned to Jerusalem. When they got back to the upper room, the other disciples were talking about what happened during the day and they were trying to make sense of it all. Just then, Jesus appears, seemingly out of nowhere. After assuring them that Jesus was, indeed, physically with them by letting them touch Him and eating some fish with them, Jesus revealed to them all the Scriptures said about the Messiah. Now, we could go through all 54 of the verses in the Old Testament that talk about the Messiah, focusing on the ones about the Messiah suffering and dying, but it would get tedious pretty quickly and a subject such as that would be better in a Bible study format rather than in a single sermon or even a sermon series.

What I would like to focus on is the last verse of our reading. Verse 47 in the NRSV reads "and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." A better reading of this verse from the original Greek would be "that repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations." This would be consistent with other parts of the Old Testament that tell us that God requires a contrite heart rather than sacrifices. Since Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, we do not need to give any further sacrifice though we still need to repent of our sins. It is being aware of our sins and wanting to change our ways from selfish ways to the way that God wants us to live. In the reading last week from first John, John encourages his readers to refrain from consciously sinning, though acknowledging that we still sin.

So, where does that leave us? We are in that tension that Martin Luther described of now, but not yet; the tension of being a saint and a sinner. This is a tension where we know what we are - that is, a child born in sin; yet we are a child of God through Jesus Christ where we are given the promise of the forgiveness of our sins and of everlasting life with God. The quandary we find ourselves in is that we realize that we cannot keep the law, yet have this promise of forgiveness. Do we just continue on sinning and rely on this promise of forgiveness, or do we acknowledge that sometimes despite our best efforts of doing what is right, we still mess it up?

This quandary has been with humanity since the Fall of Adam and Eve. While the Fall was precipitated by Adam and Eve's desire to be like God, sin had been lurking at our door ever since, seeking to drive us further from God. In the story of Cain and Abel, when God was asking Cain why he was angry, God also cautioned Cain, saying, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Gen 4:7). However, we find that sinning is usually the 'easy way out' that it will address what we want for ourselves at that moment and not what God would want for us. We continue to face this quandary, this crossroads at every decision that we have to make. Sometimes, it will be a good decision and sometimes, it will be a poor decision. It is in how we react to the decisions, both the good and bad ones that points to which direction we are going.

If we make a good decision and think that we did it all on our own, that we had no guidance in reaching that decision, then this response is a bad response. We put ourselves in the center of decision. When we acknowledge that we had help in making that decision, hopefully we acknowledge that we were guided by the Holy Spirit in making the decision. We follow the example of Jesus and Paul in pointing to God as the source of what we can do.

If we make a bad decision, do we acknowledge our part in making the decision, taking responsibility for it or do we shift the blame somewhere else? In what Jesus is saying in the Gospel reading, Jesus would like us to take the responsibility for the wrongful actions that we commit and commit to turning back to doing God's will. It is not only this acknowledging our wrongdoing, but also expressing a desire to not do it any longer.

An example of this would be in our court system where a person who has been found guilty of a crime. If they show remorse for what they had done and accept responsibility for their actions, they may receive some leniency. However, if they express their belief that they had done nothing wrong or were forced into doing what they did, then the courts would be less inclined to show leniency.

While leniency of a sentence for a criminal is not exactly like forgiveness, the point is that we must acknowledge our own failings and have the intention of doing better. That is where we ask the Holy Spirit to help guide us along that way of doing the right things. The question then becomes how do we know if what we feel we are being led to do is the right thing or not? First off, do we have a peace within us from the decision? I have found that when I do make the right decision, I will experience a peace and confidence in that decision where there is no second guessing. Next, do the anticipated consequences of our actions negatively impact someone else? Granted there are usually consequences which we cannot foresee, hence we have the 'law of unintended consequences' which means that we cannot foresee every impact that our decisions will bring. But for those consequences which we can anticipate or those for which we hope, how are others affected?

From Jesus' words, this proclamation of our sins and the granting of forgiveness of them is something that is done in a public setting. It is within the gathering of believers that we announce our intention to repent, our intention of

turning back to doing God's will and not following our own secret desires. By doing so publicly, we are in effect asking everyone who is present to help us to follow God's will and we are expressing a willingness to help others.

Some people think that our mission is only to proclaim Christ crucified and because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are automatically saved because of the grace of God given to us through Jesus. However, it is clear from this text that our mission is to proclaim that repentance of our sins leads to forgiveness in Jesus' name. The consequence of that of that proclamation to all the nations is that with the forgiveness of our sins, we do receive the promise of life eternal with God. This mission involves action on our part - action of not only confessing our sins, but also developing a yearning to learn and follow God's ways as taught to us by Jesus.

One other observation from this text. In the Jewish tradition, the Jewish people who live outside of Jerusalem are to travel to Jerusalem for the major festivals. The center of the religion is the Temple in Jerusalem and God was 'contained' in the Temple. Jesus is reversing that so that the proclamation of forgiveness begins in Jerusalem, which is where the disciples currently are, outward to all the nations. Following this Gospel text, Jesus instructs the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit who will lead and guide them in fulfilling their mission of proclaiming the repentance of sins leading to forgiveness in Jesus' name. May we be willing to go where the Holy Spirit leads us to proclaim this Gospel message.

YouTube Links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/Azbr981tIPA>

Service: <https://youtu.be/OTxha-8msY4>