

Proper 19C 2019 Sermon

1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Gospel: Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

This past Wednesday was the 18th anniversary of the World Trade Center ... what should I call it? It wasn't a "bombing;" no bomb was used. Newspapers speak of "the Attacks" on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; and attacks they certainly were. But that word does not do justice to the immensity of the deed. Tragedy? Certainly it was that, especially for those who lost friends and loved ones, not to mention those who lost jobs as the economy plummeted (one of my family members went bankrupt as a result of 9/11). The World Trade Center... What **do** we call it? It is so hard to describe; it's easy to see why we simply say, "9/11". But that term has its *own* drawbacks, for in its very comprehensive inclusivity, it allows for any and every possible interpretation and reaction to that event, from profound grief to anger to nationalism to self-righteous hatred of all Muslims or Middle-Easterners or foreigners in general.

And so I would suggest that we use another word to describe what happened that

day, a word I believe to be both more helpful and more Biblical; a word which I did not hear once this past week in all the talk about what happened on that day 18 years ago. That word is: sin. Sin.

It is, I would suggest, an eminently appropriate term for what happened on 9/11! For “sin” isn’t a word which fans the flames of self-righteous moral indignation; it doesn’t wave the flag and demand a response to reclaim our national honor; it doesn’t rationalize away or euphemize the heinous nature of those acts. And “sin” and “sinners” are words used throughout the Bible; indeed, used in today’s readings by both St. Paul and Jesus.

Now, let me hasten to say that I am not using the word “sin” here as it is often lampooned and parodied in cartoon caricatures of hellfire-and-brimstone preachers; nor am I using it in the judgmental and shaming sense in which it is used by the self-righteous – like the Pharisees and scribes in today’s Gospel, and like some Christian preachers still use it today. Rather, I am using the words “sin” and “sinners” in the same sense in which St. Paul uses the word “sinners” in today’s Epistle: which is to say, I am using the word “sinner” in the full realization that *I* am myself a sinner, no better than any other. In our Epistle, Paul writes: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.” St. Paul is the foremost of sinners! To say, then, that you and I are *not* sinners would be pretty presumptuous.

All this past week, in his daily email devotions,¹ Richard Rohr focused on what he calls “shadow work.” “Our shadow self,” Rohr explains, “is any part of ourselves or our institutions that we try to hide or deny because it seems socially unacceptable... Jesus called it ‘the log in your own eye,’ which you [don’t see, but rather you project it outward and] notice it as the ‘speck in your neighbor’s eye’ (Matt. 7:3-5).”² In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” And Jesus does not say that to the Pharisees, but to his own followers; which includes you and me.

In saying that he is the foremost of sinners, St. Paul is revealing that he has done some serious shadow work on himself. He writes to the Romans (and I use *The Message* translation), “It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s pretty obvious that not **all** of me *joins* in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge... I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.” (7:21-25, *The Message*) That is St. Paul honestly facing his own shadow.

My friends, each week, in our Eucharist service, **we** confess that we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We confess that we have not loved God with our whole heart, or our neighbors as ourselves. And then we say to God, “We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.”³

But I wonder if those are just words we say? Do we live them out in our lives? Do we ever take the time to examine our lives and identify, *specifically*, what deeds we have done or words we have spoken or thoughts we have thought that were less than loving or kind? Have we stopped to examine how we did **not** do some kindness which we could easily have done? Have we pointed fingers at all the specks in our neighbors’ eyes while not once noticing the log in our own eye and taking steps to remove that log, so that we can see our neighbor more clearly and lovingly? My friends, I, for one, am very often guilty of not following through on the confession I make each Eucharist – not admitting that I might be wrong; constantly pointing to the specks in my neighbors’ eyes, while I am blind to the log in my own eye.

Now, let’s face it: our egos do not *like* to look at our shadow selves, do not like to even entertain the possibility that we might be wrong in our strongly held beliefs, or have failed, or have hurt others. We don’t like to admit, as St. Paul so honestly does, that we have sinned and continue to sin.

And our modern American culture certainly does not encourage such honest and humble self-evaluation! This is so easy to see in our politicians, on both sides of the aisle, who do everything in their power to avoid admitting they are wrong or that they have any flaw. They will attack their opponents mercilessly, pointing out all the specks in their opponents’ eyes, while not once admitting they have logs in their own eyes. And it’s not that politicians are any different from *us*; it’s just that they are on public display, and therefore their behavior – their blaming and scape-goating and refusal to admit any weakness or the fact that they might be wrong – is always in the spotlight. I’m no historian, and I might be wrong about this, but the last time I can think of a prominent politician publicly admitting failure or sinfulness, was in 1976, when Jimmy Carter confessed in an interview that he had “lusted in his heart.” And how was that honest Christian confession received by the American people? The chairman of the Georgia State Democratic Party said, “I thought it was disastrous. I don’t know why in the hell he did it.” *Time Magazine* called Carter’s confession one of the “Top 10 Unfortunate Political One-liners.” And yet Jimmy Carter’s statement was courageous and exemplary in its Christian honesty and humility. He had said in that same interview, “Christ set some almost impossible standards for us.” He then quoted the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says, “I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery.” (Matt. 5:28) Jimmy Carter fessed up, and he was roundly criticized and mocked for it. As much as we Americans claim we are a Christian country, we mocked a Christian president who faithfully, courageously, and vulnerably confessed to his

own sinfulness, and thereby gave us an example of how to humbly and honestly deal with our own shadow.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote:

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”⁴

My friends, our shadow self is part of who we are, and we cannot become whole, cannot become our True Selves, if we *deny* that part, or project onto other people.

Some of you may be familiar with G.K. Chesterton’s series of murder mysteries centered around an inquisitive British priest and amateur detective by the name of Fr. Brown. In one of those novels, Father Brown explained his method of crime-solving by saying, “You see, it was *I* who killed all those people” -- in the sense that he looked within himself to find the mentality that would commit the crime he was investigating, and did in fact discover that sinful tendency within himself. Fr. Brown explains: “No man’s really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; till he’s realized exactly how much right he has to all this snobbery, and sneering, and talking about ‘criminals,’ as if they were apes in a forest ten thousand miles away ... till he’s squeezed out of his soul the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat.”⁵ Fr. Brown was clearly very familiar with his own shadow.

Jungian analyst and author Robert Johnson wrote, “Any repair of our fractured world must start with individuals who have the insight and courage to own their own shadow.”⁶ To own the log in our own eye. To own and confess the fact that the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, including St. Paul, including me, including you.

It requires a humble and courageous honesty; a willingness to let go of our masks, egos, false selves, our inordinate attachments to certain identity groups and cherished (but not godly) beliefs; a willingness to admit we might be wrong; a willingness to unflinchingly examine the logs in our own eyes before we start looking at the specks in our neighbors’ eyes; and a willingness to, like Jesus, seek out the lost and eat with sinners. We may find, after all, that we are a lot more like them than we had ever imagined. And the good news in today’s Gospel is that, like the man looking for his lost sheep or the woman looking for her lost coin, God will go to any length to seek out and find us, even if we didn’t know we were lost.

AMEN

- 1 See <https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/2019/>
- 2 “Shadow Work,” September 14, 2019, <https://cac.org/shadow-work-weekly-summary-2019-09-14/>
- 3 *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 360
- 4 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/13750-if-only-it-were-all-so-simple-if-only-there>
- 5 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8587568-no-man-s-really-any-good-till-he-knows-how-bad>
- 6 Quoted in Richard Rohr’s email, Sept. 14, 2019 <https://cac.org/shadow-work-weekly-summary-2019-09-14/>