

Easter 6 – May 17, 2020 Cycle A

It is a strange “fate” that brought Paul – who had looked on with “approval” as Stephen was stoned to death, persecuted Christians for their faith, and headed for to Damascus with “arrest warrants” in search of Christians – strange indeed that this same man would become an Apostle and one of the faith’s staunchest defenders. Later, “on the run” from persecution himself, instead of “staying low” in Athens – a center of paganism – Paul chose to continue his mission of evangelism there. His efforts soon “landed” him before the “Areopagus” – a sort of philosophical court of law named ominously for the Greek “God of War” – a place where troublemakers were brought. So what “fate” had brought Paul, a persecutor of the followers of Jesus Christ, to this surprising point? Being struck blind on the road to Damascus and subsequently being healed is part of the answer. But not the main. The primary reason for Paul’s “turnabout” was his direct experience of the Risen Christ. Like Thomas before him, Paul had a “My Lord and My God!” moment. We can hear this in his defense before the Areopagus... “[God] has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man who he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead”! While many in that arena “scoffed” at this “proof”, Paul proclaimed it boldly – a conviction made unshakable through personal experience. This is why he is so fearless, so convinced of the truth – even after being arrested, beaten, and stoned for his testimony! Not only has Paul seen the Risen Christ, he has experienced the power of Christ’s forgiveness for his prior actions! Joy, gratitude, love, devotion, and boundless energy have overflowed in Paul on account of this – amplified by his awareness that is it totally undeserved! Paul had done nothing to “merit” such mercy – the opposite in fact. Therefore he often referred to himself as the “least of the Apostles”. Paul was acutely aware of just how undeserving he was. Instead of accursing him for all time, Jesus forgave Paul and gave him a new and fulfilling purpose in life! Of the original 12, only Peter seems to have had a comparable missionary focus. Peter’s acute awareness of his own guilt is likely why. His denial of Jesus haunted him. Knowing that he had been forgiven such a grievous error motivated Peter. Like Paul, Peter’s cup of gratitude, love, and devotion “overflowed”. Jesus spoke of this very sort of thing: in a parable about debts – that those forgiven a greater debt exhibit greater love (Luke 7:41-43) – and later in reference to a woman who had anointed his feet with oil. He said, “I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” (Luke 7:47)

Jesus, therefore, draws a direct connection between our awareness of God’s forgiveness of sins and the depth of our love for God. Yet our reality is exactly as Paul described in Romans, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. But if this is so, why do not all exhibit the devotion of Paul and Peter? Why do not all love God as they did? The answer is clear. While all have and certainly do sin, many try not to think about it; many more pretend that they are without sin, that they’ve done “nothing wrong”. It’s a lie we like to tell ourselves.

My point is not to make any-one feel bad or guilty. Just the opposite. ALL HAVE SINNED! No one of us is “better” than another! On this count at least, we all stand on equal “footing”, on equally “unsolid” ground. Our only hope is God’s forgiveness, God’s overwhelming willingness to offer us Grace and Love despite our being completely undeserving of it! Instead of guilt, this truth should well up in us as feelings of gratitude and love. God FORGIVES us!

Following the example of Paul and Peter, our world should be overflowing with love – for God and for neighbor as self. Yet we know that it is not. Why not?

Because people do not want to admit their sins: their secret desires, their glee at the downfall of “enemies”, their feelings of envy of what others have that they do not... We’re unwilling to face the truth and admit the depth of our sin. For the most part, therefore, humanity remains stuck in your basic “Catch-22”. We don’t think we’re guilty of any sin. Therefore, with nothing to confess, we lack any gratitude and love for having been forgiven! And so, if someone calls us to repent of sins, instead of responding in sincere remorse, we deny the truth and are resentful for having been reminded of our guilt! Therefore, instead of inspiring feelings of overflowing love, Jesus’ announcement of God’s Grace and forgiveness of sins often has an effect opposite of its intended purpose: irritation and resentment instead of love and gratitude! This, in a “nutshell”, explains our present world.

Imagining themselves without sin, people resent what the Church stands for. Refusing to face the consequences of our own actions, we’re motivated to assign blame for the world’s troubles somewhere else – anywhere else: people with whom we differ politically, people in other countries, people who act and dress differently than we do... Failing to take responsibility for our own actions, we’re even ready to assign blame to God or to those who “foolishly” do believe in God! If we refuse to acknowledge our sin, “blame” **can only** fall somewhere else, on someone else. Our refusal to admit the truth, therefore, has the ironic effect of undermining love for God and neighbor, replacing it with feelings of self-righteousness and “entitled” resentment! And the more we blame others, the worse things get.

Where are we to find rescue from “this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) Jesus gave the answer to this question long ago – “love” as God loves. He even made it mandatory, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (John 13:34). He made it a condition of discipleship, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). And in our Gospel for today, Jesus made our willingness to love one another the hallmark of those who keep his commandments and are recipients of the Holy Spirit! “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (John 14:21). Conversely, if we are unwilling to love one another, unwilling to confess this sin, then we cannot receive the Spirit nor be Jesus’ disciples. Therefore, mired in our self-righteousness, we continue to resent one another and eventually begin to resent God for failing to acknowledge “Us – perfect beings that we are!” Surely that is the definition of a “Catch-22”.

In Jesus Christ, God offers us the Way out – overwhelming hope and love through the forgiveness of our sins. To have this gift, all we must do is confess our need, the utter futility of our lives without forgiveness! There is no shame here. “All have fallen short!” We are all equally in need. As it has been from the beginning, God is willing to provide for all our needs! We only need to stop refusing God’s gift to find ourselves changed – transformed into God’s loving and grateful Children! So what exactly is holding us back? Pride? Resentment? Self-righteousness? Are these things life-giving? Of course not. Thanks be to God for offering us the only path that is, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen