

Pentecost – May 31, 2020 Cycle A

Many people today reject the concept of “original sin”, not the sin of Adam and Eve so much as the idea of a fallen humanity – that all human beings are guilty of sin. It’s “passé”, part of a bygone age of ignorance and superstition; it’s “oppressive”, the core of a scheme intended to “keep people in their place” – or so say many modern “intellectuals”. Instead of understanding “original sin” for what it is – a profound truth of ancient wisdom – modern “thinkers” view it as a tool used to keep people down by “heaping guilt” upon them. Truthfully, original sin has at times been used in this way, to induce feelings of guilt to gain power over people. This is particularly tragic, for in ancient times the concept of “original sin” was a great equalizer. In those days poverty, sickness, and physical infirmities were seen as “divine” punishments for sin. Those so afflicted somehow “deserved” their fate. So reasoning, the disciples once asked Jesus about a “man born blind” – “Who sinned, the man or his parents”, that he was born this way? In the ancient world the idea that calamity was the result of sin was rampant. Original sin undermined this claim. The poor and weak were not cursed, nor the rich and powerful “specially blessed” (i.e. less sinful than others). Instead, the great disparity between people exists because of sin! Consider Jesus’ parable about Lazarus, who died longing for the scraps which “fell from the rich man’s table” (Luke 16:19-31). The idea that “sin=poverty” allowed the rich man to ignore Lazarus’ need. The result was his needless death – though “what fell from [the rich man’s] table” would have kept Lazarus alive! For his selfish indifference, the rich man was condemned to “Hades” (Luke 16:23). According to Jesus, Lazarus was not deserving of his “fate”, but died because of the indifferent sin of those who could have made a difference. Such things happen because sin is rampant in the world – in the rich and poor alike! Jesus’ parable demonstrates the reality of “original sin” and the cost of ignoring its truth.

So what does this have to do with Pentecost – the day we are celebrating? One answer can be found in Paul’s pastoral activities, the purpose behind his letters. Paul frequently feels compelled to admonish his congregations about their behavior – especially their tendency to “lord” themselves over one another. His first letter to the Corinthians is a perfect example. Paul begins by scolding them for claiming “status” according to “who” had baptized them. “...What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’ or ‘I belong to Apollos’ or ‘I belong to Cephas’ or ‘I belong to Christ’. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 12-13) Later he admonishes them for indulging themselves at the communion feast, consuming all the food while those who serve go hungry (1 Cor 11:17-34). “...Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you for this? No, I will not.” (v 22b)

1Corinthians also contains Paul’s familiar list of the Spirit’s gifts. It’s part of our annual liturgy for the installation of church officers... “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1Cor 12:4-7). Unfortunately, we mostly forget that Paul’s purpose here was as a corrective against various Corinthian’s using their “gifts” to claim status over one another! “...The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor the head say to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1Cor 12:21). Paul “drives this point home” by arguing that beyond all Spiritual gifts is love, that without it all other gifts are as “a noisy gong or

clanging symbol” (1Cor 12:1b) – annoying sounds that will drive others away! Paul’s surprising conclusion: without love all “spiritual” gifts in essence work against the unifying action of the Holy Spirit!

Consider also the Spirit’s first outpouring on the disciples at Pentecost – 50 days after Jesus’ “fateful” celebration of Passover in Jerusalem. At his ascension Jesus had told Peter and the others to stay together in Jerusalem until they had been “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). Ten days later on Pentecost: the disciples “were all together in one place... Divided tongues, as of fire... rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4 selected). Now the disciples did not speak random unintelligible languages, but the language of each of the various pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the holy days. Hearing their native tongues, Jews from every nation were drawn together... “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and the residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:9-11a). And what they heard was not some random account of the local news, but “God’s deeds of power” (11b)! In other words, the first action taken by the Holy Spirit through the disciples was to bring people of every nation together as one in hearing God’s Good News! Contrary to the claims of the Corinthians – that their gifts “set them apart and above others” – the record of Acts proclaims God’s Holy Spirit to be the Great Unifier, whose gifts are given specifically for that purpose! As Paul argued, “each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1Cor 12:7) that all may confess “Jesus is Lord”. Indeed, apart from the Holy Spirit such a confession is not possible (1Cor 12:3)!

I began by speaking about “original sin”: the idea that all human beings sin, due to our “fallen state” and our being cast out of paradise. Yet the truth is deeper than that, for our sin caused the separation in the first place! Adam and Eve rejected God’s judgement of “good and evil” in favor of their own. In effect, they kicked themselves out of paradise! It was their actions which created the rift. This is the core meaning of the Biblical account. It is sin that divided us from God. It is sin that divides us from one another. It is God’s Holy Spirit, proclaiming the teachings of Jesus Christ in our hearts, that unites! Unification in Christ is the purpose of all Spiritual gifts. And yet, what do human beings do with these gifts? The evidence of the Corinthians believers and many others in history suggests that mired in sin, we attempt to misuse the Spirit’s gifts, finding ways to separate ourselves from one another even as the Spirit attempts to unite us in Christ! To truly proclaim “Jesus is Lord” we must struggle against all such tendencies – not in others, but within ourselves!

The truth is, we remain a fallen humanity. The Good News is that God has chosen not to abandon us to this fate. Instead, God has sent Christ into the world to offer us hope – The Way out! And God continues to send the Holy Spirit out to every person, in the hope that we will receive the gift, and receiving, we will reach out in Jesus’ name to proclaim God’s love to all we meet! Amen