



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON

3-16-14

The Hopefulness of Sin

“Once upon a time, an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in his village.

“I want to ask you something,” the hunter said.

“What’s that,” the missionary said.

“If I did not know about God and sin,” the hunter said, “would I go to Hell?”

“No”, the missionary replied, “not if you did not know.”

“Then why, “ asked the hunter, “did you tell me?”

We heard a line last week from the Romans reading that captures the essence of the hunter’s question. Paul, in Romans, writes, “But sin is not reckoned when there is no law” and in today’s Romans reading, “For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation.” In other words, once we have sin defined for us- or the law established, then in breaking the law, we become sinners. That Eskimo hunter understood the dilemma.

That idea about sin might be one of the reasons many of us remain troubled by the whole concept of sin. For we have heard or witnessed how laws or definitions of sin can be more a reflection of what a dominant culture approves or disapproves of rather than perhaps what God’s wishes. We have the stories of missionaries arriving in foreign places and informing the “natives” that their lives are full of sin. So, the tribal ways of women being topless or men having multiple wives or women not allowed to speak or rule and so on are defined as sin. And this approach to defining sin has us end up with over 500 laws in the Old Testament- that majority of which we would not consider to be sinful today. We end up with another of our early church fathers, Thomas Aquinas setting out to make his life work writing the summary of all that is moral and immoral. His work is called “Summa Theologica” and it has guided Roman Catholic decision making for years. Interestingly, the story is that on his deathbed his companions found him trying to throw his writing into the fire in his room and when they prohibited him, he kept saying, “But I’ve gotten it all wrong.” I’ve gotten it all wrong.

It is our distrust, I think, of allowing others to define for us right and wrong that leads us to perhaps dismiss much that is called sin. But even if the word “sin” has been used in problematic ways, I suggest that while we might not like the word, there is still a reality in all our lives that is about essential human experiences of alienation, of connection and disconnection with the divine and with each other. That is why I am asking us to work towards a new and different

understanding of Sin and toward a realization that to recognize and embrace our sinfulness is a place of hope and freedom.

I recently read a new book that I liked very much titled, “Unapologetic: Why despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense.” The author, Francis Spufford, devotes an entire chapter to sin. The chapter is titled, “The Crack in Everything” and his definition of sin is: the human propensity to “mess” things up. As he writes, this is not just our tendency to lurch and stumble and screw up by accident, it is our active inclination to break stuff- stuff including promises, relationships, our own well-being, other people’s well-being, as well as material objects which we long to possess as our own. And we all find ourselves in situation where sometimes we caused the wreckage and sometimes were simply trapped in it, but unless we have a very high threshold of obliviousness, we all have a point where we realize we have messed things up. Let us reflect once again to the Garden of Eden – we make choices or we have choices made for us – and then consequences impact our lives. And the really bad part of all of this is that sometimes we actually want the destructive things we do. They are not accidental, but a part of us. We are truly cruel and truly tender, truly loving and at the same time likely to give in to a nasty pleasure of wasting or breaking love. Truly compassionate the truly dismissive of others. And sometimes popular culture tells us we can fix situations or we can ignore them, or distract ourselves and hope what is tickling us as troublesome will just go away.

But the more honest approach is to join Paul again as he writes in Romans- ”For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” And he ends us this section of writing crying out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”)

Wretched person that I am! May we all reach that moment in our lives – because here is the good news. Here is Spufford’s writing once again, “I’ve found that admitting there’s some black in the color-chart of my psyche doesn’t invite the blot of dark to swell, or give a partial truth more gloomy power over me that it should have, but the opposite. Admitting there’s some black in the mixture makes it matter less. It makes it easier to pay attention to the mixedness of the rest. It helps you to stop wasting your time on denial, and therefore helps you stop ricocheting between unrealistic self-praise and unrealistic self-blame. It helps you to be kind to yourself.”

And I’d add - it helps you be kind to others. None of us can resign from the web of relationships we have in the world. But we can seek to live in them with reality, with honesty, with acceptance of our responsibilities for the way things are. If we bravely keep on noticing the dark, accurate visions of ourselves, we can enter more fully into the process by which we begin to awaken, to mend, to appreciate. We acknowledge that there is a crack in everything, and since we all have the High Propensity to mess Things Up we can understand we share family resemblances. And then we can turn to face each other, and acknowledge each other as kin, and hopefully be kinder to one another. And we can rely on the line in John that tells us that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” And join Paul is saying, “Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”