



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON

6-7-15

There was a brother at Scetis who had committed a fault. So they called a meeting and invited Abba Moses. He refused to go. The priest sent someone to day to him, "They're all waiting for you." So Moses got up and set off; he took a leaky jug and filled it with water and took it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, "What is this, Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me and I cannot see them, yet here I am coming to sit in judgment on the mistakes of someone else." When they heard this they called the meeting off.

Another time a meeting was called and a sentence of punishment was passed on a brother. Abba Poeman got up to leave. "Where are you going, Father," they asked. "I have just been condemned," he replies.

Another brother who had sinned was turned out of the church by the priest; Abba Bessarion got up and followed him out; he said, "I too am a sinner."

These three are stories from the Desert Fathers and Mothers who were active from the mid-third century into the fourth and fifth century. This group of what we now call monastics are not really people who went and sat by themselves in the desert. As evidenced by the stories just told, the desert fathers and mothers did form communities and have contact with each other. What earned them their name was that large numbers of devoted followers of Jesus fled the larger cities and towns to live in more inhospitable region partly due to persecution of Christians and partly because they wished to renounce the growing religious institutionalism, the pomp and wealth being accumulated in the name of God. So they lived away from the centers of power and had growing communities for nearly a hundred years until tourists and other pilgrims kept searching them out and eventually most were organized into monastic orders – such as the Benedictines., which still kept the focus of life on simplicity, prayer and faith in the power and reality of Christ.

For the next few weeks my sermons will draw from this book by former Archbishop Rowan Williams titled "Silence and Honeycakes – the wisdom of the desert." And today's sermon is called, "Life, Death and Neighbors." This comes from a saying of Antony the Great, one of the earliest and most influential of the monastic teachers.

Our life and our death is with our neighbors. If we win our brother, we win God. If we cause our brother to stumble, we have sinned against Christ.

Jesus talks a bit division and conflict and about sin today when he says, ‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.’ Pretty harsh, perhaps, but let’s consider it blended with the saying from Antony and with this quote from Williams. “The church is a community that exists because something has happened which makes the entire process of self-justification irrelevant.” In other words – in the concrete life of Jesus, and in his death and resurrection, he has given his life for all sins of all people. It is done! All of us have fallen short and all of us have been forgiven. Nor more trying to prove ourselves as needing justification, as trying to earn favor – we need not labour anxiously to save ourselves or put ourselves right with God. Instead, Williams thinks that the “church’s aim is to be a full of people whose concern is not to separate others from the hope of reconciliation and life. A healthy church is one in which we seek to stay connected with God by seeking to connect others with God; one in which we ‘win’ God by converting one another, and we convert one another by our truthful awareness of who we are.” That truthful awareness does not allow us to divide and separate from others because our lives are bound together while on this earth.

To me this ties to the words Jesus spoke – we will all be forgiven our sins and mistakes because we make mistakes, we are sinners, we are not perfect. But – big BUT if we deny the power of the Holy Spirit and it’s transformational ability to work in our life and the life of our neighbors. If we decide that the Holy Spirit is not present and working in our neighbor, or that their sins will not be forgiven. If we seek to separate ourselves or anyone else from the hope of reconciliation – then we have committed the ultimate sin. We have denied the presence and power of God to be God. We have shut out God’s Spirit and we are dead – we are in hell, we are forsaken. And those scribes, those pronouncing judgment on Jesus were denying the presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus. They were announcing that he was separate from them – with a different spirit from God’s abiding spirit. When those scribes pronounced judgment on Jesus they shut themselves away from God’s saving gift of life for they declared that they knew what spirit dwelt in Jesus and it wasn’t the Holy Spirit. They were the ones cut off from God – for they had replaced God with their own decision making.

Williams writes: “To assume the right to judge, or to assume that you have arrived at a settled spiritual maturity which entitles you to prescribe confidently as a distance for another’s sickness in fact to leave them without the therapy they need for their souls; it is to cut them off from God....neither you nor they have access to life.” In the words of Jesus – we are guilty of an eternal sin.

So – ALL OF US ARE SINNERS! ALL OF US ARE WORTHY OF FORGIVENESS! All of us.

This is not about minimizing sin. It is about recognizing the cost of it in yourself. It is about resisting the temptation to say to your neighbor, “I know how to deal with this problem in your life – and never mind about mine.”

No, this about solidarity with our neighbor. It is about the words we will sing, “I will weep when you are weeping,til we see this journey through.

For the goal of life is reconciliation with God by way of a combination of truth and mercy. We find ourselves acknowledging with our neighbor that it is possible to live in truth and go forward in hope.

We learn that our life and death is with our neighbors. If we connect each other with the source of life we find that we also stand in the place of life, the place cleared and occupied for us by Christ.

Thanks be to God.