

October 30, 2011

**The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 23.1-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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We all know that different denominations of Christianity have different theologies, different doctrinal statements, different understandings of how God and the world work. And I think this is okay, for the most part. It means that everyone who chooses to can find a place where his or her belief system makes sense, where they can comfortably accept the challenges and gifts that a religious community brings.

However, I think it is too bad that we Episcopalians, because of these doctrinal differences, feel like we have lost access to some language. By that I mean that there are words that we commonly feel are outside our common comfort zone because they belong to a theology that does not ring true, that feels foreign and wrong. And this morning, I am specifically thinking of the words "sin" and "repentance".

It seems like we have lost these words to hell-and-brimstone traditions that use them to inspire fear and blind obedience. Even if those particular words don't ring true for us, we need to remember that we do not find a true measure of faithfulness in words or the doctrines but in the orientation of our hearts.

Sin is, as we've heard from Geoffrey before, anything that turns us away from right relationship with God. Sins are those choices, actions and inactions that stand in the way of the movement of the Kingdom of God. Sins are those things that fly in the face of the commandments calling us to love God and love neighbor. To sin is to orient your heart away from that which is of true and ultimate worth: God.

To sin is to orient your heart away from God. We sin all the time. Is it hard to hear me say that? We sin all the time, turning our hearts away from God, forgetting that we are the created, not the creator; forgetting that we are not ultimately in charge; forgetting that we have a difficult standard to live up to as Christians who follow a challenging Gospel; forgetting that the kingdom, the power and the glory are not ours, but God's. We are sinners, every one of us. And that notion *should* make us uncomfortable.

Repentance is, by definition, the opposite. Repentance is reorienting your heart back towards God. We do it every time we have confession and absolution in worship. I would argue that we do this every time we make a choice to live fully and in right relationship rather than putting ourselves above God.

Our Gospel reading today isn't about Jews and Christians. It isn't about people with power versus the masses. It is about true discipleship. The sins practiced by our wayward Pharisees were hypocrisy, vanity and arrogance. They valued their own self-worth over relationship with others. They valued their own self-image over relationship with God.

It was probably easy for them to get to that place. They were respected members of the community, known for their learning, for religious and political power. They were the keepers of the seat of Moses, the original lawgiver and the most important figure in Judaism. The problem is not the religious tradition or its teachings. The problem is the misuse of authority. They speak a truth that they do not model in their behavior. They speak of orienting lives toward God while instead they are drawing attention to themselves. They speak of taking care of others but do not do so themselves.

The sin they are guilty of is that of pride. St. Augustine says "Pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God's rule."

Orienting oneself towards God and really meaning it means that we have to start to take in and believe a radical form of egalitarianism.

It is not a secret that among human beings there are differences in physical appearance and ability, in social standing, in wealth, in intelligence. And, as human beings we place varying levels of value on those differences. It is a function of being human that we categorize and organize according to that which separates us and makes us stand out.

But when we orient ourselves toward God, when we really accept that God is the head of everything that matters, when we really mean it and live our lives accordingly, we also accept that everyone has a role to play in the kingdom, that everyone is of equal importance, that no one is lesser. That does not mean that we are all the same, that we are all equally able or gifted in equal measures. It means that we recognize that we were all created by a powerful and purposeful God who does not make mistakes.

That is repentance.

The religious officials against whom Matthew is railing are guilty of the kind of pride that causes us to believe that our own value is higher than that of others, and even higher than God.

But some of us are also alternately guilty of undervaluing ourselves, of not believing in our own worth, of withdrawing and putting bushels over our own lights. The sin of breaking relationship with God can take this form as well, as we believe ourselves unworthy of being loved.

For some of us, this can be equally as compelling as the sins of the Pharisees. When we are surrounded by those whose power we perceive to be greater than our own, when we see everywhere folks that seem to be loved and respected more than we are, it is easy to believe that we are not worthy of love or respect. And so we, opposite the actions of the Pharisees, withdraw. We pull back and do not let the world see how wonderful we really are. That, too, is a sin, avoiding relationships with one another and forgetting that God made us perfect.

And so we repent, we reorient our hearts. Again and again and again. As many times as we forget our inherent goodness and the goodness of God in others, we repent, turning our hearts and our minds and our lives to reflect what we truly value.

Karol Kimmell has taught the kids choirs a simple, lovely song, that, like so much of children's music, offers this message elegantly and succinctly: Faith that's sure is a rock unshakable. Jesus is my Lord, I'm his very own.

What difference would it make if we all began to believe that, even just a little bit, that we belong to God? How would we witness in the world if we believed that the CEO of that bank across the street was of equal value in the eyes of God and the eyes of our community as a four-year-old child with Downs Syndrome?

That would be repentance. That would be orienting our selves toward God.

Early in our lives, our kids know this. In a community like this one, they know they are loved. They sense their own value. We teach them to shine their little lights, that God's got the whole world in hand, that Jesus loves me, this I know. And they believe it. They believe that they are loved and perfect.

It is later that we become Pharisees, confident in our own power and ability. Or we become self-effacing, believing ourselves to be unworthy. Either way, we lose that assurance that God is sovereign.

The true measure of faith is not in how often we show up here or how loudly we sing. Our worth is not measured by the prestige of our title or by how much we have in our bank accounts. And to think so is sin, pure and simple. The measure of our faith is found in the orientation of our hearts. And the good news in this Gospel is that, no matter how often they turn away, our hearts can turn back.

Repent, brothers and sisters, turn your heart away from pride and vainglory, from devaluing yourself and others, from putting your faith in anything other than the One that made you perfect. Repent and orient your heart to God.