

June 26, 2011

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 6:12-23

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Being Good and Living Well

When St. Paul writes about our exercising control over sin, he has all kinds of ideas about what it is to be good and how we become so. If I were to ask you if you or someone you knew was a 'good' person what might you answer? If we were talking about a child, we might talk about his or her manners, whether or not she is obedient and respectful of others, whether he plays nicely with others, or, on a slightly different level, we might muse on how she benefits from rules and boundaries, helping her be creative, growing into the person she was created to be. Or we might bemoan how he has been raised with no real boundaries and how he really needs some to thrive.

If we were talking about someone later in life, we might talk about how he was a wild teenager, but that going into the military has made all the difference to him, given him a structure and a purpose, and how his becoming a responsible (and therefore 'good') person. We might say that she bounced from thing to thing and then found her calling as a veterinarian and then settled down to become a truly lovely person, easy to be with, hospitable and kind and good.

I expect you see where I am going. We need boundaries in order to grow and those boundaries are often norms or rules, but norms or rules do not make us 'good'. Sometimes they even get in the way. As Jesus reminds us: Rules are always made for humanity and not the other way around.

Every one of us who grows up in a reasonably stable set of circumstances—whatever the shape or challenges of our family—does so with certain ideas and expectations of how the world is supposed to work. We might describe these assumptions we have as 'hard-wired'. They are fundamental norms by which we live and navigate our way in the world. When we encounter norms that are different from our own, that is something of a crisis. I will never forget the couple I was preparing for marriage some years ago. In one of our conversations that young woman said to her intended in both shock and high dudgeon: "What do you *mean*, we always open our presents on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day?" They worked out a new understanding and plan that they thought would work for both of them and that new understanding functioned like a rule. We don't really need rules when we are all prepared to live by the same norms. Rules develop when diversity demands them.

My father tells a lovely story in this regard. He went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge on completion of his national service in the army. The then Master of Magdalene was a man called Walter Hamilton who evidently had a very distinctive way of talking. He was wont to welcome the new members of the college by saying:

“Gentlemen, in this college we have no rules. But if you break them, we send you down.” It all worked as long as everyone understood what it meant to be a ‘gentleman’. As the class system changed, the country became polyglot, women were admitted to the college and so on, rules were bound to follow as new understandings, not yet norms, were negotiated. Rules might help us live together, but they don’t make us ‘good’.

In time however, even those rules or ‘new norms’ if that I what they have become seem not to work for some people some of the time. Those for whom they work tend to be ‘conservative’ and resist change, often blaming, belittling and otherwise denigrating those seeking change as somehow not quite worthy. Those who think that change will make for a better life for everybody are ‘liberal’ with respect to the rules and can and do frequently set about engaging in behavior as unattractive as those who would keep them from sharing in power. Our so called ‘culture wars’ whether played out around the Pentagon budget, gay marriage or appropriate music for the liturgy are all part and parcel of this dynamic of what happens when it is clear that the rules don’t work for everyone. As long as the fight is about new rules versus old ones, we are all missing the point for St. Paul.

“Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” You have in effect become slaves to the norms and rules that lead to righteousness or ‘right relationship’, even recognizing that there will be conflict along the way.

I came across a good example of how this can work a few years ago when I was privileged to be the guest of an Amish Bishop in an Amish home. The Amish come out of the Anabaptist tradition and they speak a kind of German that modern German speakers can recognize a bit. They are the ‘horse and buggy’ people, a kind of separatist purity sect of Christians when you come right down to it. In their community this bishop was a ‘liberal’ because he was willing to talk to a group of pastors about his life and faith. He was also a liberal in that he allowed relationship to govern his interpretations of some of the most separatist rules. One of those rules is that if you leave the community after baptism you are to be ‘shunned’ by everybody. Now the bishop’s oldest son had rejected the Amish post-baptism. His particular form of rebellion was to join an even more conservative sect of some kind. So our bishop had to ‘shun’ his son. He told us that what this meant in practice was that when his son came to dinner he had to be served, rather than serving himself at the family table. He had to be treated like a guest. The bishop did not let the rules be so literally applied that he could not see his son. The rules of the community are important, but so is being a slave to right relationship rather than right rule-following.

There is something else that I suspect was going on with our good bishop. I suspect that it was terribly difficult for him socially to have a son who had engaged in what his community would identify as something like apostasy. We can be sure that there was some conversation as to whether he should be able to lead given what was going on in his own household. At some level he had to ‘die to self’. There was really nothing more that could happen to him in regard to his son. Any shame he knew, was most public and so, in a way, he was freed from enslavement to sin and freed for righteousness even in the midst of brokenness. Neither his family nor his community were quite as ‘pure’ as he

might once have hoped. He knew that the 'wages of sin is death' however and chose to live doing the next right thing, loving his son and his people as best he could, sharing his story even with the likes of a mixed group of pastors and getting on with life.

So rules are good. They need to be changed and renegotiated from time to time. They need to serve rather than restrict righteousness. We are most likely to be 'good;' when we are not constrained from making our love manifest even while trying to honor the norms of our communities. We are most likely to be 'good' when we pay attention to both. "Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life...you are not under law, but under grace."

Honor the rules where you can. Change them where you must. But always seek first to be slaves to the law of love.

I invite you in a time of silence to think of that of which you are most ashamed. If that thing has power over you, then consider how to let it into the light. (The rite of reconciliation can be helpful here). And if not, give thanks that in that respect at least, you have died to self and been raised to newness of life. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray.