

## **Holiness is beyond us**

A Sermon for the Season of Pentecost

Mark 2:23-3:6

A teacher once said: "All thinking in Christianity is summed up in the problem of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments." A lot of the problems are there. But that teacher may not be steering us rightly because it doesn't matter where you begin – you can begin at the beginning or begin at the end – all of it is tied together, and it is one.

What then should be our starting point? You start with what the problem is. And the problem is sin and death. We are caught in an inevitable run through sin to death, and the question is: How can we get out of it? What can be done?

To get at that, let's look at some illustrations:

In a recent interview on "60 Minutes," Pope Francis said: "We are all fundamentally good. Yes, there are some rogues and sinners, but the heart itself is good."

Really? What about Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt"?

The Pope's claim, however, that people are fundamentally good is nothing new. It's part of the Enlightenment, which held that basically people are good, basically people are innocent. What we need is more education to be more tolerant. After all we're made in image of God, and there is something in us that can tell us what to do, and we can do it if we just work at it.

That's why the text in Mark 2 about the Sabbath is so important, because people will often say: At least you know what the Ten Commandments are.

This, of course, is where we are completely kidding ourselves. What is said in this text in Mark 2 is not that Jesus threw out the Sabbath, but that he transformed it. He transformed it just as in the fifth chapter of Matthew, where the other Commandments are transformed but not abrogated.

We, those of us in the Western church and particularly those of us who take the Bible seriously, face the problem that we keep as our main worship day the first day of the week, Sunday, not the seventh day, Saturday. The Sabbath is Saturday.

It cannot be shown in the New Testament that Jesus or anyone else ever suggested that we should stop worshipping on Saturday, the Sabbath, and switch to Sunday, the first day of the week. We Christians have to face up to the fact that we don't keep the Third Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

In the early church for the first three hundred years they struggled with this problem. They debated among themselves: "Shall we worship on the Sabbath, Saturday, as the Third Commandment says, or change to Sunday?" And eventually most Christians moved worship to Sunday, to keeping the first day of the week, except for the Seventh Day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists, who continued with keeping the Sabbath, Saturday, as the day of worship.

But if you are going to say, if you want to know what sin is, just look at the Ten Commandments and keep them, you've got a problem with the third Commandment for just starters. What do we do then?

What does "sin" mean? If you look up "sin" in a concordance or dictionary, you find that there are many kinds of words for "sin." One of them is "missing the mark." If you tried to shoot and didn't quite hit the bullseye, you missed the mark. Or sin can be said to be "disobedience." You were to be obedient, but you didn't do the right thing, or do enough, and you didn't do it sincerely, you were disobedient. Or another word for sin is "lawlessness." You have to keep the law and keep all the law and not just some of it.

And then suddenly you come to the apostle Paul, who always writes of "sin" in the singular, never "sins," in the plural, except for when he is quoting someone else. For Paul, sin is a power that grabs you. It's not something where we say either we make it, or we don't make it, either we are obedient or disobedient. Rather, sin is a power that grabs you and ensnares you. Suddenly, it's a different world.

What does Paul then do? Paul makes a very clear identification between sin and death. Romans 6:23 says: "The wages of sin is death." In 1 Corinthians 15:26 he writes: "The last enemy to be conquered is death." 1 Cor 15:56: "The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law." In Romans 5:12-13 (paraphrase): In Adam all of us sinned; in Adam all of us died. Sin and death are the same thing. Everyone who dies is a sinner. All are caught in sin and death.

The Western Church has struggled with this and defined this finally in 529 A.D. at the Second Synod of Orange. (The Eastern Church does not hold to original sin.) But the point that is most omitted among us today is that, according to what the Bible says, the image of God was lost in the fall into sin, and it's only restored in Christ. That is specifically stated in Colossians 3:10. Unless one is in Christ, one doesn't have the image of God. There is not some way that one regains the image of God by doing good or keeping the law.

Luther speaks to this situation in a fascinating way where he says that the last temptation, the sneakiest temptation of the evil one, is to make us think that we can tell what sin is and isn't. And then we know. We can determine it by the way we feel, by our conscience, or by guilt, or by some other sense that we can tell. Then the evil one has us; he has caught us because the big sin, the basic sin, the real sin is spiritual pride. We are all caught in it. We

say: "Well, that was the Christian thing to do." Or "that person acted in a saintly way." Or: "It's simple. You know what is good and you do it. You know what it's about." When we think like this, that we know what sin is and isn't, then the devil's got us.

Again and again Luther quotes from Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." And it's not just that verse. It's the same as Jeremiah 17:9, which we noted earlier: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt." And Romans 3:10-18 "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12).

But when we hear that we are caught in an "EGO" moment: **E**yes **G**laze **O**ver. It can't be me! I tune out at that point. You mean I don't determine what sin is? I can't know what sin is? I thought it was a trifle that I could fix it by doing good.

Of course, we can't. If anyone starts to wake up to this problem of spiritual pride, as Luther points out very well, then you fall into spiritual despair. Because you realize we can't get out of it. We're trapped. We're always thinking: We know. We can sort it out, especially for others but also for ourselves. We know what it is and therefore we can work it out.

Luther and the New Testament, especially Paul, point out: The only way one knows what sin is through the price that was paid to solve the problem, that is, through the cross. The cross tells us what sin is. As Luther wrote: "[T]he infinite greatness of the price paid" shows that sin's power is "so great that it could not be removed by any means except that the Son of God be given for it" (LW 26:33). The cross is the only definition we have for what sin is.

What does that mean? First of all, it means the Lord saw that we were caught in sin and death. And second, he handled it on the cross his way. We would never have thought of doing it that way. He did it his way, and, of course, it is done.

The movie, *The Passion of Christ*, which is often shown in Lent, is a problem. The problem is that the film focuses on the awfulness of death by crucifixion. As awful as that is, it's not awful enough. To be sure, we could think of other ways of killing somebody and of dying that would be even worse. That's not the main thing.

No human event can, even in a tiny way, describe what it is for the Holy One to take on sin and death. Holiness is beyond us. We cannot comprehend that. It blows everything apart. That's the main thing.

We think that all God wants is for us to try to be good, when, as a matter of fact, he's not asking us to be good; he's asking us to be his, which is an entirely different matter.

It's like old Anna, who lay dying, and the pastor came to visit. "Anna," he asked her, "Do you believe in total depravity?" "Yes, I do," she answered, "it's a savin' doctrine."

Only sinners have need of a savior. Only the holy one could solve the problem of sin and death, and he did. He took care of the problem his way, it is finished (John 19:30), and is summed up in 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Let us gather together. Come, let us worship the Lord, as the Psalms say, "in the beauty of holiness," (Psalms 27:4, 29:2, 96:9), and as the New Testament says, in the holiness and glory of his cross and resurrection. Amen