

I wonder how many Christians will attend worship this morning and be surprised that this is Pentecost Sunday – called the birthday of the church. The scripture read this morning is a letter written to us as much as those early followers. Throughout the letter, we are asked to recognize that we have been justified through the grace of God’s loving presence. That word “righteousness” is a notion of living in a new environment, actually breathing a new kind of air. It is the Holy Spirit that we hear from this morning.

Just like the early church, the Church of 2010 is made up of a motley crew of people from all different backgrounds, traditions, families, environments. Yet, we are asked to somehow get along – to understand each other, to love one another, work together – when often it feels like we too speak a different language from our neighbors. And just like those early Christians, we have choices. We must decide what kind of life to lead.

A while back, I asked a police officer about the various issues facing our communities – the growth, the traffic, unemployment. But his emphasis was on drugs. We don’t like to think that our neighborhood is a place where we find drug dealers who make millions every year. After all, we have two schools within a mile of the church. Yet we have to accept the fact that even this neighbor is not exempt from sin or corruption. He told me about drug dealers even selling to our grade school children. I asked, “What can be done?” He said, “I was reading in a professional magazine a while back that a man named Kelly Burke, the DA in Houston, Georgia banishes them from the community.” I asked, “How does he do that? How does it help? Aren’t they just going to go someplace else?” My friend answered, “Well, for one thing it disrupts the dealer’s selling cycle. If he slithers into another community, he has no standing there. It will be difficult for him to do business in the same way – it’s a new market and he’s an unknown. There are other “business owners” already operating there. They don’t want the competition.”

He continued, “Burke does this all the time. He has a file on 62 criminals called “banned.” If you’re picked up in his county for shoplifting, stalking, drunken driving or especially drug dealing, you have an option to be banished. Seems like a positive option to prison. You can get a fresh start somewhere else.” I said to my friend, “Hmmm, too bad we can’t deal with sin like that.” He laughed along with me. But then I did a little research and discovered that banishing criminals from their home towns has been part of the crime and punishment picture for centuries. It actually dates back to the ancient Greeks and Romans who did indeed deal with sin in this way.

Although once quite popular, it has pretty much vanished from the scene except in a few states like Georgia and Kentucky. Most prosecutors in this day and age object to it and believe it may be a deterrent to rehabilitation and further education or employment, but Kelly Burke says, “If you can’t uproot a criminal mind from a person choosing crime, then you uproot the person from the community.”

In spite of our aversion to even say the word “sin,” Paul talked about it all the time. Even when we say the Lord’s Prayer, in spite of the correct interpretation of the word as sin, we would rather say “Forgive us our trespasses.” After all, we can always think of those who might trespass on our property – crowd our space. Or we say “Forgive us our debts” – after all, everyone seems to be in debt these days. That can’t be too bad. But if we use the correct word “sin” it convicts us, it causes us to think about confession, making right with God. So we stay away from that ugly word.

In a New Testament class many years ago, a professor once told me, “Sin is often there as a friend, someone or something we know and have learned to live with. It’s almost as though we welcome it at times – it’s a sign that everything is normal. Everyone does it. We laugh at times and say, “The devil made me do it.” Everything is normal! Yes, at times, sin is the drug of choice or the dealer standing on the street corner we all know, someone or something that is difficult to catch and prosecute. And even if we cut it out of our lives for the moment, it often comes home and picks up right where it left off.

I think Paul is trying to tell us that sin knows its way around the community – our body, mind and spirit. We know it well. It would be so nice if we could banish sin from our lives, our community, but it doesn’t work like that. Instead, it takes work to recognize it, to address it, and to make it right with God. Sin is not easily escaped. Oh, some have tried to run from it – there is a story of St. Jerome who thought that by fleeing to the desert he could leave the dancing girls of Rome behind him. The problem was, he found that even in the desert, he still had a problem with those dancing girls!

So what do we do with the problem of sin in our hearts, minds, bodies – our very souls? How do we resist it? How do we avoid sins of commission or omission? Remember Paul’s words, “I do the things I should not do, and I fail to do the things I should do?”

Paul has a few things to say about this that might help us along the way. First, he tells us to use our bodies and our gifts and talents for good rather than evil. What he is saying in his often complicated language is simply that we should not allow ourselves to be passive tools in an unholy agenda. He’s telling us that we have a choice – we can choose how we will use our hands, our feet, our eyes and ears, our bodies and souls. We can choose how to use our gifts and talents, our passions and desires. These are all part of our humanity – and God has given us, as his children, the ability and right to choose. We have choices!

Just like those who gathered together on that first gathering of what we now call the Church of Jesus Christ, we have to decide – good or evil? Purity or impurity? Clean or dirty? Right or wrong? God’s light or darkness? Life or death of the soul?

Yes, we have many more temptations today than ever before, but it is pointless to whine about it. It’s life! The challenges are greater than for past generations, to be sure, and that’s what makes it imperative that we remain grounded in Christ. Paul tells us that as Christians, we must decide right from the start how we are going to establish our core of values. That is what we do in Sunday school with our children as well as adults. We are about the business of assisting God’s children in building a foundation so that when we are out in the world, we remember who we are and our choices and then we stick by them no matter what.

Paul tells us to “Present our bodies to God as those who have been brought from death to life and to present ourselves to God as instruments of his creation.” Think of it. Think of how you would feel if someone saved your life. Those who have experienced war often know this moment. Or those experiencing a near drowning or accident or even those who have suffered a heart attack or near fatal illness. Do you remember how you felt about those involved in your care? Those who literally saved your life?

That is how we come to God every day in prayer – as those who have been saved from spiritual death. Our spirit is alive and well and filled with God’s grace and love. In that realization, we live our lives in peace. We are secure in God’s love. That is the gift we receive from Christ just by believing.

Paul goes even further. He calls us “Servants of God” where we remember that we are here to do more than be happy and filled with our own peace. We are here to do God’s work and remember our relationship with God and pass that relationship on to others. When we do that, we act with honor. It doesn’t matter whether we are the president of a corporation, the leader of a country, a dancer, a football player or a socialite. No matter who and where we are, we are here to serve God.

“Freed from sin and enslaved to God.” Certainly that word needs to be interpreted as well. In this context it comes from a different root word and meaning. “Slaves” to God has to do with our reality and identity. We belong to God and if we live in that reality, then any service we offer is blessed by God.

Banishment may work in Georgia but in life, we have to deal with sin in a different way. We deal with it by exercising good choices, by remembering who we are wherever we go, whatever we do, we are God’s alone. And we know that forgiveness is always possible – simply because we are God’s. Amen.

Sermon preached by The Rev. Joy A. Baumgartner
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