

SERMONS AT ST. MATTHEW'S

DON'T WALK AWAY

1 John 3:1-7

We are in the Easter season, but as Mario preached last week, there is no Good News of Easter without the death and suffering of Good Friday. Without death there is no resurrection. Without sin there is no redemption. Without enslavement there is no liberation. Without bondage there is no deliverance. We cannot fully celebrate the good without acknowledging the true nature of the bad from which we have been rescued.

This is true from two different, but equally important perspectives. The first is the measure of just how good the news is. It is on a dark moonless night that a light seems to shine the brightest. And, the second is the recognition of our former condition so that we might not fall back into it and forfeit the good we have been given. Putting down the oven mitt in order to grab the roasting pan bare-handed a second time is simply inexcusable. This second perspective is the one St. John is writing about when he says:

³*And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*

⁴*Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.* ⁵*You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.* ⁶*No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him (1 John 3:3-6).*

The hope that we have been given is that we have been *called children of God* and *now are children of God*, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, in addition, we will be perfected as children of God in the future when Jesus returns. It is the hope of the resurrection in which what we are now will be transformed into what we will be. That perfection is our conformance to the Son who is the perfect child of God. It is also our recreation in the perfect image of God, which was God's intention from the very beginning of Creation.

If that was God's intention, why is it not so right now? It is because of sin, which was first exercised by Adam and Eve in the Garden when they chose to disobey God. Sin is the misuse of the gift of free will in order to arrogate ourselves to the status of God. We have chosen in every generation to worship ourselves and to create a god in our image. We have chosen to disown the Father and thereby have walked away from our status as his children. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *the Problem of Pain*:

Man is now a horror to God and himself and a creature ill-adapted to the universe not because God made him so but because he has made himself so by the abuse of his free will (p.65).

Yet, the same Divine love that created us with a free will also informs God's redemptive work on our behalf. We have denied that love in the case of our free will to our own ruin. In his letter, St. John is urging us not to deny it in the face of God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"* (John 14:15).

And again: *"...the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and believed that I came from God"* (John 16:27).

Both our love of God and our acceptance of God's love are demonstrated by our obedience to God's will. Jesus was pure in that he was sinless; he not only is the incarnate Son of God, but he also lived a life of perfect obedience to God. His obedience extended even to the point of dying for our sins because that was the will of the Father. When we are exhorted to purify ourselves as Jesus was pure, we are not called to a state of sinlessness, for that is impossible for us to achieve, but we are called to a life of growing obedience to God. Obedience and sin, which is lawlessness, and therefore, disobedience, are diametrically opposed. A good biological metaphor would be pregnancy. A woman cannot be pregnant and not pregnant at the same time. She cannot be almost pregnant. Nor can she be a little pregnant. She is either pregnant or she is not pregnant. Sin is dis-obedience.

Thus, to sin is to reject both God's Law or will and his amazing love for us demonstrated through his death on the cross. We cannot love God and at the same time demonstrate such extreme ingratitude in our lives. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews emphasized the consequences of such ingratitude when he wrote:

*²⁶For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a fearful prospect of judgment...
²⁹How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? (10:26-27a,29)*

We have been sanctified, put aside by God as his children through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The opportunity for a renewed relationship with God has been made possible only through his most costly grace. Although all sin is always a denial of his grace, the sin for which we will be judged is that which we have not confessed and from which we have not repented. It is the sin that we declare to be "not sin," even in the face of Scripture and the tradition of the Church. By doing, so we replace the authority of God in our lives with the authority of self. We are then listening to the siren voice of the serpent hissing in our ear that we can be like God.

In this world, a man may adopt a child, but it is only through obedience that that child becomes a true son. So it is in the kingdom. When we choose to justify and abide in our sins, we disown the Father and walk away from our status as his children.

The Good News of Easter is the hope of our restoration as children of God. But as Jesus had to die before he could be raised from the dead, we too must die to sin in order to be raised to righteousness. We must show our confidence in the Easter hope by acknowledging our sins and dealing ruthlessly with them here and now. To do otherwise is to walk away from both our Father and our hope.

Let us pray.

We come before you Father acknowledging our pathologic independence and our addiction to self. May we, with your help O God, repent of those thoughts and actions which stand between us and the consummation of our hope. Send your Holy Spirit to convict us of the sins that we as yet have not acknowledged or recognized. Strengthen us through your Spirit to abandon them and all other sinful ways, so that we might truly be your children, now and for ever. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on April 26, 2009, the Third Sunday of Easter.