

Sermon for the 2006 STS General Retreat

September 26th 2006
Tuesday of 16 Pentecost

Job 12:1; 13:3-17, 21-27; John 8:33-47

Pastor Karl Johnsen, STS

Calvary Lutheran Church, Edmonton, Alberta

I have been known at times to frequent certain Christian bookstores of the sort with which I am sure most of you are familiar. You know the ones. The place where you can buy everything from "*God's Gym*" and "*This Blood's for You*" T-Shirts, to the latest installment in the ubiquitous *Prayer of Jabez* franchise. And of course, let us not forget, right up there by the checkout, the ever popular "*Testa-Mints*". The breath freshener with a message to share.

Somewhere in that same store you are bound to find any number of wall plaques, posters, calendars, and coffee mugs, each bearing some inspirational message straight from the mouth of our Lord. You know the ones; "*I am the bread of Life*", "*I am the light of the world*", "*Behold I stand at the door and knock*". But it strikes me that I have never seen an inspirational poster, coffee mug, calendar, or T-shirt quoting our Lord's words in today's gospel text where he says "*You are of your Father the Devil, and your will is to do your Father's desires.*" (John 8:44a) I guess this is not surprising. When looking for something to put on an inspirational poster, we tend to gravitate toward something more, ... well ..., inspirational. Something more comforting than convicting.

At the end of the day however, we ought not to worry overmuch about what brothers and sisters in other Christian denominations do or do not put on inspirational posters and T-shirts. But perhaps we would do well to worry that we might just be tempted downplay or even ignore words such as these in our ministry of preaching and teaching. They are after all, uncomfortable words, and we like to see ourselves as being in the business of comforting people.

Therefore, perhaps we might be tempted to ignore them, or to relegate them to some sort of secondary status on the grounds that they do not "drive Christ" as well as does a passage like Romans chapter 8. But the mental gymnastics required to contend that the words of St. Paul drive Christ more effectively than the words of Jesus himself is just a bit beyond my ability to bear.

Or, we may choose to interpret these words very narrowly, solely within the context of Jesus' conversation with *those* particular people, in *that* particular place, at *that* particular time. But it strikes me that perhaps we are overly quick to do this. Especially when you consider how quick we are to interpret a more comforting passage such as Jesus' gracious words of forgiveness to the woman caught in adultery in the more universal sense, that is, as being true for *all* of us, and not just for *that* woman, in *that* place, and at *that* time.

Perhaps there is some benefit in letting Jesus' hard words stand and accuse us, in all of their stark and dark simplicity.

So, let me try this T-shirt on for size:

*"I am of my father the devil, and **my** will is to do my father's desires."*

But immediately, I begin to protest:

"Am I really all that bad? Doesn't this sound just a bit too judgmental? Surely I do not deserve God's wrath, if indeed such a thing still exists in these enlightened times. I'm just not feeling the love!!"

Soon I find myself taking the position of Job, protesting my innocence. Soon I, like Job, am desiring to speak to the Almighty, and to argue my case with God.

In the passage we read today, and in a few other places in the book of Job he expresses this desire. Certainly Job had something to complain about. Certainly more than I do. Just about everything that could go wrong, had gone wrong. And now, to add insult to injury, he is finding himself having to defend himself against his well meaning but ill-informed friends who accuse him of not copping to the crime that he must have done to deserve his fate. And so, he wishes to speak with God. He wishes to make his case. He is not supposing that it will be easy, or without peril.

*Let me have silence, and I will speak,
and let come on me what may.
I will take my flesh in my teeth,
and put my life in my hand.
Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope;
yet I will defend my ways to his face.
This will be my salvation,
that a godless man shall not come before him. (Job 13:13-16)*

Job then begins speaking to God, and asks Him to number his iniquities, and to make his transgressions known to him. There are a couple of ways that we can take that last bit. Either Job really wants to know what his sins are so he can correct them, or else he is indicating that he is quite sure he has gotten a bum rap and is challenging God to show him otherwise. And I am not quite sure which one is right. Sometimes Job seems to me a paragon of faith, 'knowing that his redeemer lives' and all that. But at other times he becomes downright shrill in protesting his innocence, even to the point that he is prepared to go to the heavenly court, and to make his own defense.

But I wonder, just what did Job suppose that he would say in his own defense? What would you say if you were going to speak in your own defense in the heavenly court, before almighty God? And to further complicate matters, what would you say if you, like Job, had already accepted the conclusion that God was somehow responsible for your plight, or at least had failed to prevent whatever calamity you might be suffering, when he surely could?

Would we not at this point be subtly switching the roles, putting ourselves into the seat of the judge, and putting God into the seat of the defendant? Was this not after all what Job was doing by being so sure of his own righteousness, that he was prepared to "... *take his flesh in his teeth, and defend his ways to God*"? (Job 13:14) Is this not after all, the sin of Adam and Eve, in listening to the lies of the serpent, and desiring to be like God, knowing good from evil? When we do things like this, in the clear face of God's word to the contrary, do we not call him a liar? Do we not, when we desire

this, set ourselves up as judge of God, and of his Word? Do we not show ourselves along with those in today's gospel lesson who presumed to judge the word of Jesus, to be of our father, the devil?

That is what sin is like. It is slippery, and hard to grasp, but impossible to let go of completely. It is impossible to isolate and set aside. It pervades everything, even our own honest attempts to be righteous. This is why even the most sanctified among us, those "living Saints" who seem to be farther along the road to *theosis* than most of us, when asked what it is like to be so godly, will say with unfeigned honesty that they don't think they are all that godly at all. In fact, by implying that sin lies farther away from them than it does from you, you will likely provoke in them a greater worry over the sin that lies crouching at their door. Sin is like the eggs in a cake. We know they are there, but try as we might, we cannot remove them once the cake is made. So, when we come to the heavenly court, there is only one thing we can bring that is ours by right and by nature, and that is our confession of sins.

But wonderfully and ironically, it is just at this point where we are able to hear the good news. It is when we acknowledge the indefensible nature of our sins, that Jesus Christ himself rises to our defense, and not with clever words intending to show God that we are not so bad after all, or that the calamities we suffer are some sort of terrible heavenly mistake. For no matter how righteous we might try to be, our righteousness is imperfect. But Jesus rises to our defense, offering the white robes of his own righteousness in the place of ours. For we are far from perfect. But Jesus is perfect, and through his innocent suffering and death, and by his glorious resurrection, salvation is offered to all who believe.

Job said *"This will be my salvation, that a godless man shall not come before him."* (Job 13:16) I am not sure if Job meant here that he was quite certain of his own godliness, or if it was that he was desperate, and was willing to take the chances in the heavenly court, or perish in the attempt. But I am sure that in a way that perhaps he never intended in this statement, that he was nonetheless correct. Our salvation *is* in the fact that a godless person will not come before God. But we, brothers and sisters, are not godless people. But this is not of our own doing. It is a gift of God, in Christ, given in Baptism to all who believe. When we come to the judgment seat, we come with Christ leading us as disciples. We come with him within us, for we receive him in his body and blood. And, wonderfully and mysteriously, we come to God, in Christ, as his mystical body.

When we approach the throne of grace, we may well approach with a word of lament on our lips, for surely we all suffer various trials and temptations, and surely God is willing to hear of them. But lest we begin to believe the lie that our sufferings are somehow beneath the dignity of our own attempts at righteousness, let us ever seek to temper our lament with godly sorrow and contrition, and with our confession of sins. For that is the only confession that we can truly claim as our birthright. But let us also come with another confession on our lips. One that is also our own, but not by right or by nature, but only by God's gracious gift through the call of the Gospel and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. And that confession is that Jesus is Lord!

We come with no defense to make, only asking:

*Lord have mercy,
Christ have mercy,
Lord have mercy upon us.*

AMEN

Society of the Holy Trinity

contact: webmaster@societyholytrinity.org

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