

Homily – Everlasting Union with God

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Here is a twist on a well-known Bible story.

Jesus came upon a small crowd who had surrounded a young woman they believed to be an adulteress. They were preparing to stone her to death.

Jesus confronted the crowd and said, "You who are without sin cast the first stone."

Suddenly, a rock went whizzing past his ear.

To which Jesus said, "Oh, Mother, stop it!"

In some, but not all, of our Christian traditions, Mary joins her son, Jesus, in the ranks of the sinless. As we page through the four Gospels there is nothing that we can point to and say "Jesus sinned," or "Mary sinned."

And, some of the irony in this little story that I just shared is that just being in the crowd, let alone throwing a stone, would have been a sin for Mary. She would no longer have been a sinless one.

Now, throughout human history, I am not aware of anyone else who has been declared sinless. Mary and Jesus stand alone.

The tradition of the sinlessness for Mary is a bi-product of our tradition that says Jesus is sinless. As it goes, Mary must be sinless since we can't have Jesus tainted by Mary. He came out of her womb so she had to be clean and sinless so that the stain didn't ever touch Jesus. She also had to be a virgin since sex was thought to be almost synonymous with sin, and again we can't have even a hint of sin associated with Jesus.

It is said that the famous evangelist, Billy Graham, used to have his associates walk into a hotel room before him since he, Graham, never wanted to walk in and have a prostitute or anyone else entrap him in apparent wrong doing. Billy Graham went to great lengths to keep the hint of sin away from him, and theologians go to even greater lengths to keep the hint of sin away from Jesus.

Yes, Jesus is human, but he is a human being who never sinned – not as a child, not as a teenager, and not as an adult.

He might have lost patience with his Disciples every time they seemed to get it wrong again, but this is not considered a sin.

And, Jesus might have gotten angry and even violent with the money changers in the Temple, but this was also not considered a sin.

And, on the Cross during his crucifixion, Jesus might have said words that seemed to show he was despondent, but this too was not considered a sin.

Somehow Jesus was able to live for thirty-three years without sin.

Now, maybe I should digress for just a moment to define sin.

In the classic sense, sin means to miss the mark. An archer aims at a target but misses. This is sin – missing the target.

And, in the ancient Hebrew tradition, the Ten Commandments and the other six hundred, or so, laws of the Old Testament told you where to aim your life. Every time you broke one of the six hundred laws, you missed the mark and you sinned.

Then two thousand years ago, Jesus came along and raised the bar on sin. Or more accurately, he changed the game entirely on sin. Jesus taught us that anything that separated us from God is sin. And, here is the way Jesus reframed sin in the language of love.

God is always and eternally present with each and every one of us. There is nothing that we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God loves each and every one of us equally and unconditionally. And, God loves those who have wronged us just as much as those who have done good to us. God loves.

However, we do many things during our day and in our lives that keep us from seeing the love of God. Jesus let us know that sin is anything that keeps us from being aware of this love. And, sin is anything that keeps us from responding to God's love. Sin gets in the way of our love of others and self. Sin keeps us from reflecting God's love back out into the world. Sin separates us from God and others, which makes us forget that our birthright is union with God.

Now, even though we have just started the season of Lent, a traditional time of preparation and penitence, we are a church that does not talk about sin very much. In many congregations, the only sins openly announced from the pulpit are low attendance, poor stewardship, and failure to volunteer in the thrift shop.

Twenty-first century Americans do not like to be reminded of our sins, and if we have to talk about sin, it should be about the sins of those other people. In addition, we are more comfortable talking about our communal sins. You know, those sins that we have in society like racism, sexism, and violence. Conversely, we are very uncomfortable talking about personal sins, yet I think we all recognize that we are doing things in every hour if not every minute of our day that separate us from God and keep us from reflecting the love of God back out into the world.

In her book, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", Annie Dillard shares the following story about sin. "Once upon a time an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in his village. "I want to ask you something," the hunter said. "What's that?" the missionary said. "If I did not know about God and sin," the hunter said, "would I go to hell?" "No." the missionary said, "not if you did not know." "Then why," asked the hunter, "did you tell me?"

Most of us think that if we don't talk about or think about the topic of personal sin, then we have less of it. We mistakenly think that if we avoid the topic of sin then we will be more like Jesus.

However, sin breeds when it is hidden, and it is diminished in the light of day and with attention. Anyone who has ever been through Alcoholics Anonymous, or any other twelve-step program, will tell you how important it is to be mindful of, acknowledge and take responsibility for personal sins. In general the twelve-steps of AA are universally applicable to overcoming temptation and sin. I don't have time to review them in this short homily, but the first step is to admit we are powerless over our personal sin—that our lives have become unmanageable. The second step is to come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. I commend the twelve-steps to you, and admire those of you that are in twelve-step programs. You are doing some amazing work to overcome temptation and sin.

Now, let me get back to the topic of Jesus and sin. "While Judaism's solution to the darkness of sin was to follow the Torah or the laws of the Old Testament, Jesus became the embodiment of Torah for Christianity so that following him became the Christian way of safety – or salvation – from sin." Jesus models sinlessness for us.

Remember the updated definition of sin that I shared earlier. Jesus let us know that sin is anything that keeps us from being aware of the love of God. And, sin is anything that keeps us from responding to God's love. Sin gets in the way of our love of others and self. Sin keeps us from reflecting God's love back out into the world. Sin separates rather than connects.

Somehow, since he was both divine and human, Jesus was able to constantly maintain an awareness of God. He was able to continually respond to God's love by sending love back out into the world. Jesus is unceasing in his reflection of God's love. Jesus is always aware of his union with God.

However, while our tradition says that Jesus was without sin, it does show that he faced temptations just like the rest of us. In our Gospel passage today we see Jesus entering the wilderness for forty days of fasting, forty days of prayer, and forty days of meditation. While the Bible only says that Jesus fasted, we can be assured that some pretty intensive prayer and meditation accompanied this fasting. Jesus was preparing himself for his three years of public ministry by fasting, praying and meditating.

And according to our Scriptures, during this time of prayer and meditation, Jesus was approached by the devil with diverse temptations. We are all beset by a variety of temptations in life, and today's Gospel passage shows that Jesus was adept at avoiding them. Some of us are more tempted by a simple thing like food and possessions. Some of us are more tempted by control of the physical world. And, some of us are more tempted by power over the kingdoms of the world.

During his forty days of fasting and pray and meditation, Jesus avoids the same temptations that hit many of us each day. And, I think he models how we can sidestep the temptations as well. Like Jesus, we can use prayer and meditation to connect us to God and to strengthen us against the temptations of life.

For "to practice meditation is to open ourselves to the endlessly reassuring realization that our very being and the very being of everyone and everything around us is in union with and connected to God. We meditate so that we might awaken to this unitive mystery, not just while we meditate, but in every moment of our lives.

Two thousand years ago, this is how Jesus lived. When he gazed at a child on his lap or a leper wanting to be healed; when he looked at an adulteress or his own mother; when he witnessed the joy of a wedding feast or the sorrow of loved ones weeping at the burial of a loved one; when he observed his own disciples or his executioners—Jesus saw God. We meditate so that we might also learn, with God's grace, to see God in all that we see."

In this way we better face the temptations and sins of life and rise above them. In this season of Lent and beyond, I encourage you to find a type of meditation that works to bring you into the fullness of your life in God. Remember we are already connected to God. We just need to remember that everlasting union.