

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
20 Pentecost, Proper 25, October 27, 2019
Text: Luke 18:9-14

Super Sins of Self-righteousness and Self-justification

Sin! Now that's a word that will stop a conversation. Or at the very least, it makes us want to get away. That's probably because we are afraid it might get personal and who wants to admit to being wrong, or wicked, deliberately disobeying the known will of God?

The early church was very concerned about sin. Early third-century Christian Mystics known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers lived in solitude, praying and contemplating our relationship with God, and equally praying and analyzing the human condition and our propensity to sin. They are the ones who classified the seven deadly sins – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth. But in New Testament Greek, sin means “missing the mark” (I like this one best).

Back to the seven deadly sins. The Desert Fathers and Mothers fell short. There are two more. The eighth is Self-Righteousness and the ninth is its close cousin Self-Justification. These are so deadly and so sneaky that I like to refer to them as the super sins.

We've all encountered that self-righteous person who thinks they can do not wrong, who goes about with a “holier-than-thou” attitude, judging and scrutinizing everyone, who is smugly moralistic and intolerant of the opinions and behaviors of others. They need to be right, to win, to be perfect all the time – unquestionable, infallible. They intentionally forget that even Jesus J-walked every once in a while. And I, sinner that I am, sometimes just want to see them fail. Fail once. Just once.

The Pharisee in today's Gospel rattles on about how wonderful he is, how much better he is than other people, how superior he is to the miserable tax collector who is wringing his hands at the back of the church. The Pharisee is elevated and puffed up in his own image of himself, so puffed up, in fact, that he cannot be open to God. He is so full of a sense of his own goodness that he no longer recognizes in himself any need for God at all. His prayer is a list of all the good things he does, or thinks he does, rather than an honest meeting with God. If God had been able to get a word in edgewise during this man's prayer, I wonder what God would have said. Or perhaps the truth was that the man was not actually speaking to God at all, but merely to his own ego.

In contrast, the tax collector sees that he is in need, and Jesus tells us that it is he who has the right attitude. This man recognizes that he comes to God with nothing, and can only trust in God's mercy. He knows he is a sinner--that is, he has done, said and thought things that have not pleased God. Yet he does not go through a tedious litany of everything he has done wrong. He simply stands humbly before God and asks for mercy with a penitent heart.

Its all about the heart, folks. The prophets foretold that the new covenant with God's people would be inscribed on the heart, not on stone as the old law had been.

I am constantly amazed by those who seek a deeper spirituality by reading some new book, by taking one more course, by staying in the head, and then saying “I can't

find the depth of spirituality I seek.” That’s because God doesn’t speak through the head but through the heart.

Now I am not saying that reading, studying, and learning are a bad thing. They are essential to fully open the heart to hear God. But it is in the silence of the heart that we encounter God just as the tax collector did in today’s Gospel story. It’s in the heart that we are justified, declared right, made right with God. That was the tax collector’s experience and that is our experience when we seek God in our hearts.

Now I know that none of us are as extreme as the self-righteousness person I spoke about, the one with every bad self-righteous trait I could think of. But we can get puffed up, judgmental about those others that are different, and sometimes think that we are absolutely right to the point that we close our hearts to God’s voice.

At other times our self-righteousness may not be even that blatant. The close cousin of self-righteousness, self-justification can take hold of us. We know what God wants us to do, we know what Christ like living is, but we don’t want to give up some comfort, or take on some inconvenience to fully live a Gospel life. Our behavior becomes inconsistent with what we say we believe, and we justify our behavior pretending that it’s OK.

For example: We know that creation did not end with God saying “in the beginning,” that it is on-going and that we are co-creators with God. We know this means that all God’s children have the right to a fair wage that supports a decent living standard, have the right to health care, and that we are to protect the environment and all God’s children. But we demur, back-peddle, find excuses to justify our inaction. “Everyone in the world won’t play ball with us so why try,” and “I need to think first of my own before I take on the world,” are but two of the recent self-justifications I have heard.

But scripture insists that the confidence and ultimate justification of believers lie with God, and condemns those who look elsewhere. In other words, God condemns self-justification. God condemns it because like self-righteousness, self-justification is of the head and not the heart.

Today’s Gospel story ends with the words “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Let this be a reminder for us always to be on guard for these super sins of self-righteousness and self-justification that so easily sneak into our minds and block our hearts. Let us be the humble servants that do for and give to others out of love, who do not boast, who listen to and respect all we meet, who practice patience, and who take time to be silent and let God talk to us. Let us practice it in this community, this body of Christ, and then take it to the world, one person, one town, one nation at a time so that the whole world becomes more like the kingdom of God.

Amen.