

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Lent I

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

We are confronted with an Old Testament reading which tells of the human susceptibility to temptation and also to the desire to be all knowing, controlling and in fact unaccountable. The desire to be like God was so attractive that Adam and Eve were willing to abandon their relationship with God in order to be like God. In the gospel story, we encounter a Jesus who rejects all that is powerful, controlling, domineering and with little to no accountability. Paul in his Letter to the Romans seeks to bridge the gap between these two stories by presenting Jesus as the solution to the problem in the story of the fall. He argues that since in Adam all die, even so in Christ would all be made alive.

For Paul then, the symbol of death and sin represented in the story of the fall, was not sufficient in disturbing the human hope in life. Human hope is in Christ. For through obedience Christ has made visible what human perfection looks like. Through the free exercise of the human will, Christ accomplished what Adam could not.

St Augustine latches upon Paul's presentation of Adam, and in his *Letter to Simplicianus*, who was the Bishop of Milan, writes that mankind is "one lump in which the original guilt (of Adam) remains throughout." But he does not stop there, he further writes that "The unmerited grace of God which can alone inspire in man a delight in the good." On the one hand, Augustine looks at evil or sin as an intrinsic part of our fragmented self, and on the other, he recognizes that it is only the grace of God which can drive our search for goodness and fulfillment.

The search for fulfillment is a symptom of being human. The depth of our emptiness is the realization of a hole which only yearns to be filled. The problem is we want to fill these holes by ourselves. And in the process, we end up putting square pegs in round holes. And so These holes never gets filled. The story of the fall, of daring to disobey the commandment not to eat of the fruit, even though there was a promised consequence for eating of it, tells a story about our core. It is not the scare of punishment that holds us back. My children remind me of that all the time!! It is something deeper than that-it is the existence of the hole. Adam and Eve represents the part of us which believes that the satisfaction to emptiness or nothingness is to seek our fill or worth outside of God's widening embrace and commonwealth. The reason why the story of the fall still resonates is because we too, like Adam and Eve desire to fill our emptiness by eating of the forbidden fruit, we desire to make ourselves worth something by ourselves-and often times by any means necessary.

There is a story in a book-*The Farthest Shore* by Ursula Le Guin. She tells of a magician, Ged, who faces the gaping emptiness within him with these words "You exist, without name, without form. You cannot see the light of day: you cannot see the dark. You sold the green earth and the sun and stars to save yourself. But you have no self. All that which you sold, that is yourself. You have given everything for nothing. And so now you seek to draw the world to you, all that light and life you lost, to fill up your nothingness. But it cannot be filled. Not all the songs of earth, not all the stars of heaven, could fill your emptiness."

We know we hunger and thirst, and desire to be filled, but we do not know how, and often fail to acknowledge that role Christ plays in that quest. A French Cardinal captured human emptiness and our need for God with these words "A human being is a nothing who is at home with God, whose natural habitat is God, who is capable of receiving God and of being filled by him."

In the gospel story Jesus is presented with bread to satisfy his hunger after fasting for forty days and nights. Who wouldn't be attracted with such a gesture-just pick and eat. After all you are hungry.

But Jesus shows us, that the fact that we are hungry, the fact that we desire to be filled doesn't mean every bread presented to us is worth our consideration. Jesus points out to the tempter that one shall not live by bread alone. Because bread alone doesn't satisfy. The temporal doesn't satisfy. It is the eternal which satisfies. It is the Word of God that satisfies. Like the Psalmist said "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!" It is this Word which assures me of being forgiven, which helps me to acknowledge my weakness and to celebrate the possibility of new beginnings, that is what satisfies. And so to limit oneself to bread alone, is to deny oneself of the satisfaction beyond the material. It is God who satisfies us. And those who are satisfied in their obedience to the Word that comes out of God's mouth never lack, they never lack in goodness, compassion and the pursuit of justice, for their joy is made complete in the one who satisfies human longing.

Beyond human longing and emptiness is the seduction of power. Eve is promised by the serpent that she will not die, and that God knows that by eating of the fruit, not only will her eyes be open, but she will be like God and know good from evil. The serpent even paints God to be as a manipulator. Jesus is also presented with the power and majesty of the world. Look at the world with its glory and splendor, only bow and all will be yours. It was an enticing offer. To be like God or to have dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth is tempting. But whereas Adam and Eve fall, Jesus doesn't fall. In a sense, to fall or not to fall for the seduction of the tempter is determined not by the human will alone, but by the extent to which we are driven by the desires which pulls us away from submitting and surrendering to God's direction and will. We like to believe that power rests with our ability to own, and to control; but true power is best exercised in perfect freedom, our freedom to reject the power which seduces us into believing all things but offer us nothing.

To deeply understand our nature and ourselves, we have to realize that being human is a movement, a becoming, a journey from what we are into what we are not. Adam and Eve reflect what we are but Jesus reflects what we are not. And by Paul's calculation, Adam was everything Jesus was not. Our task then is to journey from Eden to the hills of Calvary and the tombs beyond the city walls of Jerusalem. There, outside those walls, lies the hope that Lent offers.

The hope of our Lenten journey is the resurrection of Jesus. And that hope may call on us to hate God, the 'enemy' within us, the 'disturber' of our peace, the one who calls us to the vocation we do not like, but yet, is essential in renewing and cleansing us from sins great and small. To hate God, is to acknowledge the reality of a power within us who calls our attention to our sins, and to whom we cry out *kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy)-a song of deep gratitude and sorrow which also acknowledges our reliance on God. As one author said, "Hatred of God may bring the soul to God."

Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. Jesus said to the tormenting devil. It is through worship and service that we chance upon the resiliency of a gospel story which announces our need for salvation. Truth is, if you are not a sinner, you would not need the good news. But who is it that isn't a sinner? Who is it that does not need the good news? Who is it? We are all like Adam and Eve, empty and void and failing temptations. But we too can become like Jesus the Christ, filled with God's Spirit, and eager to overcome the seduction of power and to triumph over all temptations. Amen.