

Sermons at St Paul's

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 27, 2015

Carroll Anne Sheppard; Licensed Preacher, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

*”Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
Let them not get dominion over me;
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.”*

This is verse 13 from our Psalm this morning. It is a prayer that resonates with the words we are hearing from Pope Francis as he makes his way to the public Mass that will culminate his visit here this afternoon. Throughout the great response to his visit to our country, he has continued to warn Americans of our moral responsibilities – to each other, to future generations, to the poor, the children, the needy, and to the world's refugees.

What I would like us to think about this morning is the phrase from our Psalm: “presumptuous sins” and their outcome.

*”Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
Let them not get dominion over me;
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.”*

I suggest this, because it is getting right to the heart of what Pope Francis is pointing out to our Western developed world. We are in very big danger of presumptuous sins – and it is not necessarily easy to understand why our daily life might contain them.

We recycle, we get as close to tithing as our budgets allow, and we try really, really hard to respect our fellow human beings. We volunteer, we buy things for the Food Cupboard and St. James' School; we work at the Rummage Sale and Face-to-Face. We

serve on charity boards, we make contributions to dozens of charities and we give as many hours of our time as we can to worthy causes. So what is a “presumptuous sin?”

Pope Francis has said that it is systemic. It has to do with simply assuming that the way we were raised is somehow the right way. It has to do with assuming that our parents and grandparents knew some superior way to be human, and perhaps Christian. It has to do with not realizing how blest I have been by my time and space in human history.

Dear Friends, I am so guilty of this. After the Depression and World War II, my grandparents and parents in victorious America tried hard to be sure that I would not lack for anything. Life was not flossy always, but there was never a night without a good nutritious dinner, and my school lunch was never crackers. I grew up in a world where I simply expected a safe neighborhood, a solid roof over my head, and clothes to wear. I could build forts with the neighborhood kids in the woods, and ride my bike anywhere. It did not seem blest. It seemed normal.

And that is what Pope Francis is asking us to think about, as he condemns our frighteningly successful, presumptuous 21st century Western capitalist system. It is a system that will shortly be a global macro-capitalist economic system. How do we learn to use this very effective and successful tool in ways that Jesus would smile upon? What is the fine line between our comfortable lives and being unwontedly greedy?

What does it mean to commit “presumptuous sins?”

When do we cross the line that Jesus draws? He is clear in Mark’s gospel that it will be better for us to go into the future handicapped and blind, rather than fail to serve “the little ones.” And perhaps that is what presumptuous sins are about.

When we presume to think that we are entitled to an easy and good life; when we presume to think that because of skin color someone else is not so entitled; when we dare to assume that a refugee is not a child of God, we are guilty of a presumptuous sin. But how do we live our lives in this challenging world free of presumptuous sin – if we were raised in a world that taught us to think some of these things were part of “the way things are?”

The Way of Jesus turns all these presumptuous sins 180-degrees around. If we are followers of the Way, as much as we are able, we will let Jesus define our identity,

and not the marketers and financial scare hawkers. We will not operate from a philosophy of scarcity that says “If you have enough, I will be lacking.” Instead we will operate from a theology of abundance, which says, “If I have enough, you also will have enough.”

Here are some ways to test if there are presumptuous sins in your life – and you may well think of others. Does part of my life have (as the Psalm says) dominion over me? Do I have the freedom to give away to those in need what I could enjoy? Or do I make sure that I have more than enough, and only give away what I won’t miss?

Are there habits of life, of consumption and status, which have dominion over me and my family? And most of all, do we presume to think that this is the way it should be? Have we lived thoughtfully and carefully enough so that we know what is necessity and what is more than we really need? How much food, water and clothing are wasted in our house? And do we consciously ask who in our world is in need of the freedoms and comforts we enjoy?

In fairness to ourselves, we need to ask: are there also benefits we might derive from living more abstemiously and more generously, if we struggle to prevent ourselves from falling into presumptuous sin?

Our psalm suggests that indeed there are two quite remarkable outcomes. I suspect Pope Francis, as well as our Presiding Bishop elect, Michael Curry, would agree with both of them. We shall be whole and sound – that is, persons who have healed from spiritual injury and are morally well. Also we shall not be under the dominion of possessions or uncontrollable desires. Finally, we shall be innocent of great offense – that is, free of the soul-destroying consequences of grievous sin.

You see, there is a secret penalty for those who are burdened by presumptuous sin. There is always the gnawing question – can I continue to have all this? Will someone else get something bigger, better, more expensive than I have? Can I ever relax and simply enjoy God’s good world and the pleasure of what my own grandfather called “an ample sufficiency?”

You see, the burden of presumptuous sin is also the burden that Jesus invites us to lay down. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. When we lose our lives for his sake,

we live in a world of God's abundance, and we are willing to share, to care, to be whole and sound, in Jesus' Name.

Amen.