

Sunday, October 13, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Our New Testament reading today comes from Luke's gospel.

Jesus is traveling through the region between Galilee and Samaria.

He encounters a group of people suffering from leprosy who cry out for help and healing.

As the story unfolds our attention is drawn not only to Jesus' extraordinary power and compassion, but also to the many ways that we experience and respond to that power and compassion.

The reading is from the gospel of Luke 17: 11-19.

Sermon - "Why Confession?"

The passage of time has been recorded in eras with labels often describing cultural themes or leadership dynasties: the Renaissance, Elizabethan, Protestant Reformation, Age of Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, Victorian etc.

I fear that the time we are currently living in might come to be labeled the "Age of Entitlement."

We seem to be cultivating a society devoid of compromise, collaboration or compassion.

Selfishness and self righteousness have supplanted concern for others and commitment to the common good.

Today's gospel reading reminds us that this attitude is not new to humanity – it has perhaps just become more acceptable.

One author identified nine reasons why the lepers did not come back to thank Jesus-see if they sound familiar to you:

1. One waited to see if the cure was real.
2. One waited to see if it would last.
3. One said he would see Jesus later.
4. One decided that he had never had leprosy in the first place.
5. One said he would have gotten well anyway.
6. One gave the glory to the priests.
7. One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything."
8. One said, "Any rabbi could have done it."
9. One said, "I was already much improved."

It is notable that the one man who did return to thank Jesus was a Samaritan – an outcast among outcasts.

He was technically not permitted to address Jesus.

It is interesting to ponder whether his nine associates cast him out once they were no longer considered unclean themselves.

Historically, this human inclination toward selfishness has been kept in check by acknowledging it as a weakness or sin, repenting and seeking forgiveness.

Sin has sort of gone out of fashion lately.

No one wants to admit to being less than perfect.

We are in an age of positive self esteem.

Everyone is a winner.

I think it might be prudent of us to take a look at the history of sin and confession to determine if there are traditions that we might want to carry forward.

In the Old Testament we find ritual sacrament whereby one makes a sacrifice to appease God for wrongdoing.

A mediator or holy man is often employed to communicate with God seeking mercy for the sinners.

We find in the psalms the ancient practice of lamenting one's shortcomings and calling out to God for help.

The psalmist cries out "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation."

In the New Testament, Jesus promises God's forgiveness to all who seek it with their whole heart.

He encourages his followers to forgive others, as God has forgiven them.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...In fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me...Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

It is notable that in each instance the sinner takes personal responsibility for his own actions.

The nature of sin in human beings has been the subject of debate since the early church. .

Augustine championed the belief that humanity is universally affected by sin as a consequence of the Fall (Adam's breach of God's command).

The human mind, he believed, had become darkened and weakened by sin precluding one from thinking clearly-hence poor decisions.

For Augustine, it is through God's grace alone that we are forgiven and saved.

Pelagius, an opponent of Augustine, argued that sin was an act committed willfully, consciously, against God.

Centuries later John Calvin personified sin as the devil in his writings:

For he opposes the truth of God with falsehoods, he obscures the light with darkness, he entangles man's minds in errors, he stirs up hatred, he kindles contentions and combats, everything to the end that he may overturn God's Kingdom and plunge men with himself into eternal death.

This is where we begin to see a shift away from personal responsibility. "Blaming the devil" can still be heard in religious rhetoric today.

In 1729 British theologian William Law described the Christian life in A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life:

The person who dares not say an ill-natured word or do an unreasonable thing because he or she considers God as everywhere present performs a better devotion than the person who dares not miss the church... To be humble in our actions, to avoid every appearance of pride and vanity, to be meek and lowly in our words, actions, dress, behavior and designs—all in imitation of our blessed Saviour—is worshiping God in a higher manner than do they who have only stated times to fall low on their knees in devotions. Those who content themselves with necessities that they may give the remainder to those who need it; who dare not spend any money foolishly because they consider it as a talent from God which must be used according to his will, praise God with something that is more glorious than songs of praise.

As the American colonies took shape, there was much debate on the development of a moral code for the new communities.

In 1741, Congregational Preacher Jonathan Edwards delivered his famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God*, first in Northampton, MA and then in Enfield, CT.

This particular sermon is credited with converting ten percent of the population of New England in a two-year period.

Edwards preached in a steady, clear voice, always looking straight ahead.

He eschewed theatrics and drama in preaching.

Here is a brief excerpt from *Sinners*:

Sin is the ruin and misery of the soul; it is destructive in its nature; and if God should leave it without restraint, thee would need nothing else to make the soul perfectly miserable. ...

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care

and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.

In 1947 the Episcopal Church adopted St. Augustine's name in putting together a prayer book that encouraged a daily self examination of one's behavior to determine personal sinfulness.

Broken down by the ten commandments the prayer book poses a series of questions with these instructions:

Write down briefly what you remember of your sins. Don't try to be dependent on your memory. Remember that you are trying to recall them in order that you might be forgiven, not that you may be condemned.

These are the questions for just the first commandment-- Thou shalt have none other gods but me:

- Have you been more interested in self than God?
- Have you made it your chief aim to be always on top?
- What have you been vain about; personal appearance, clothes, personality, possessions, your family, ability, success in games or in studies?
- Have you scorned other people for their misfortunes, their sins, stupidity, or other weaknesses? Scorned other people's religion?
- Talked too much; called attention to yourself?
- Been sorry for yourself, self-pitying?
- Refused to admit when you were in the wrong? Refused to apologize?
- Been resentful or suspicious of others through over-sensitiveness?
- Have you been stubborn and self-willed? In what ways?

Pretty strong criteria for being righteous before God.

Today, we steer away from talk of sin and the devil.

We utter prayers of confession that are soft and vague like this one taken from a recent book on "prayers for worship":

"Forgiving God, Let us confess the secret sins in the hidden spaces of our lives which hold us in fear and anguish, keeping us from God and one another."

The spiritual practice of claiming one's brokenness and asking for help in overcoming such has become more of a feel good exercise than a condemnation of behavior that is selfish and debilitating.

I believe that we have lost our way.

I believe that our sense of entitlement and expected forgiveness has robbed us of a social conscience and a moral compass.

Our loving God has forgiven us so many times that we have become like spoiled children who taunt authority figures, knowing that they will get away with their bad behavior.

So, why confession?

To remind us that we are in covenant with God;

God of transcendent power;

God whom we approach with reverence, wonder, awe and adoration;

We confess to renew our commitment to Jesus Christ who died for our sins.

We confess to proclaim that we are Christians.

Let's take a look at some of the questions that emerge from today's lesson:

What if we were still afraid of God?

What if we believed that our behavior would be judged according to how it affected our fellow human beings?

If you were one of the ten lepers cured by Jesus – what would you have done?