

March 18, 2018
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:1-13
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.¹

The prayer I just read is the collect for the day, which you heard Jakki say at the start of the service. It's from our Book of Common Prayer, which we will return to shortly.

Here's a question for you: Is the church a *hotel for saints* or a *hospital for sinners*? Let me ask it again, in the reverse order: Is the church a *hospital for sinners* or a *hotel for saints*?

That question goes back at least to the *fifth* century, to an argument between two men named Augustine and Pelagius. You can tell who won by this observation: Augustine was sainted, and Pelagius was excommunicated. This particular Augustine—Augustine of Hippo—is perhaps most famous for crafting the doctrine of original sin. From that you might guess correctly that he was in the hospital-for-sinners camp.

Sinners or saints, here's the gist of the issue:

On one side: Humans are by nature sinful. The stain of the sin of Adam is upon every human, and therefore every baby is born bearing original sin. A human can play no part in their own salvation. Thus, the church is a hospital for sinners.

On the other side: Humans are by nature good. The sin of Adam was his alone, and therefore every baby is born without sin. Humans have free will, the ability to open themselves to receive God's grace, and therefore to play at least a part in their own salvation. Thus, the church is a hotel for saints.

It's worth noting that the thought that became known as Augustinian and Pelagian was codified less by Augustine and Pelagius, and more by their followers. Their followers created an opposing binary that both oversimplifies their reasoning and overemphasizes their differences. It's a binary that at times seems at odds with itself.

There is a lot about sin-talk during Lent. It's difficult to isolate the subject. Sin infers salvation; salvation infers the afterlife. We might discuss justification and sanctification, which could very well lead us to the Apostle Paul. There is individual sin and corporate sin. Questions about the nature of humans leads to questions about the nature of God. Seminarians love this stuff, but most of you are probably already bored. So let's drive to at least *one* point.

I have opinions about tiny aspect of everything related to sin. Maybe you do, too. One of the great things about being Episcopalian—Anglican—is that there is very little that we're *required* to agree on. By design, our tradition upholds a very large tent that covers a huge variety of beliefs and practices. Historically, this was a conscious decision, made during the Protestant Reformation in England. England was transitioning from officially Roman Catholic to officially Reformed. The idea was to hold together as many people as possible—and frankly, to stop the bloodshed that the rifts had caused. A *via media*—a “middle way”—could include people who inclined more Roman Catholic as well as those who inclined more Reformed.

As regards human nature, you can believe that it is inherently good *or* inherently bad, and still be an Episcopalian. You can take that to a variety of viewpoints about the nature of sin, redemption, salvation, and the afterlife, and still be an Episcopalian. You can have a range of faith and practice, and still be an Episcopalian.

Let me offer an illustration. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the catechism looks like this [hold up the book]. There is a lot of doctrine to which members are supposed to subscribe. In contrast, in the Episcopal tradition, the catechism looks like this [hold up the pages of the BCP]. You can find this Catechism in every Book of Common Prayer, including the one in your pew rack. Occasionally I reread the whole thing, because it serves to bring me back home.

In the Episcopal Church, a spectrum of beliefs can coexist, even fruitfully so. We can diverge, while remaining in relationship. This doesn't mean we stand for *nothing*. Rather, we stand for allowing disagreement on all but the most essential aspects of our faith. We are bound together much less by common *doctrine* and much more by common *prayer*. As much as possible, disagreement need not separate us. In good faith, we can agree to disagree.

Sometimes we *do* disagree—sometimes we disagree about *which* things are so essential that we must agree on them. As the Episcopal Church slowly changed its mind on the place of women and then gay people in the church, the vast majority of people decided that we could disagree in good faith. Therefore, for the most part, through these significant transitions, the Church held together.

All this is not an excuse to be wishy-washy; it's not a descent into moral relativism. Rather, it allows us—it even requires us—to follow our own conscience and to find our own way. That's actually a lot of responsibility. It can be puzzling and difficult and uncomfortable. It can also be liberating.

Madeleine L'Engle, the author of the book *A Wrinkle in Time* is an Episcopalian. With the recent release of the film version of the book, she has been getting quite a bit of press. Part of that press has been about how the film excises the book's Christian foundations. Some say that's too bad, because of the Christianity she held. One article quoted L'Engle herself as saying this:

What I believe is so magnificent, so glorious ... beyond finite comprehension. To believe that the universe was created by a purposeful being is one thing. To believe that this Creator took on human vesture, accepted death and mortality, was tempted, betrayed, broken, and all for love of us, defies reason. It is so wild that it terrifies some Christians who try to dogmatize their fear by lashing out at other Christians, because a tidy Christianity with all answers given is easier than one which reaches out to the wild wonder of God's love, a love we don't even have to earn.²

Let's hear again a small portion of today's reading from John: "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. *Now* is the judgment of this world; *now* the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself [emphasis mine]."

God has already made the judgment, in essence, once again naming all creation *good*. God constantly reaffirms that judgment, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. With the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God set forth a new way. The Kingdom of God arrived with Jesus, so it is right here, right now. It has not yet reached its fullness, and to that measure God anointed the Body of Christ, of which we are a part. Through Jesus the Christ, God judged each and every one of us as worthy to be loved, with humility, compassion, and kindness. Through Grace, God inscribes God's covenant on our hearts.

Regardless of how we feel about the nature of human beings, here's where I hope we agree: God is capable of redeeming everyone and everything. And so, whatever you believe about sin and salvation, maybe the important questions are more like these: Whichever way you lean, what does it mean for you in practice? What does it mean for your relationship with God, for your relationship with other individuals, for your relationship with the world, for your relationship with yourself?

To put it another way, if you put legs on your theology, what do you do, and where do you go? Years ago I read one theologian who called that idea, "theology on the hoof." The hoof, the paw, the fin, the snake belly, and even the leg, what does it mean to walk that theology, in here [*motion to congregation*], in here [*motion to heart*], and out there [*motion broadly*]? That's what can and does define us individually as Christians and communally as a congregation of the Body of Christ.

One of the challenges of less flexible churches than ours is this: the idea of good and bad, heaven and hell, in and out, somehow starts to be enacted with one another. As I said last week, I am personally unwilling to make a judgement reserved for God. This is not to deny the reality of sin. We miss the mark, individually and communally. But I do want to deny the practice of using sin to shame, sometimes instilling in them anxiety that follows them up until the moment of death.

A lot of theology about salvation was written by the men in response to their own shame and anxiety. I'm pretty sure that my opinion about theology and salvation reflects *my* shame and anxiety. And so I am led to ask: What is it about salvation that makes *you* feel shame or anxiety? What would our *God of love* say about that? Maybe your questions and your answers are a reflection of God's grace at work in you.

In the end, the only true doctrine is love—love of God, love of neighbor, love of oneself. Imagine God's loving graciousness as being a part of the air we breathe. Think of it as the tiniest and most elusive of the elements. Think of air as being composed of oxygen, nitrogen, and *eros*, the passionate love of God. Breathe it in deeply, and let it fill your lungs and travel through your bloodstream. Imagine it filling you, so that you can love the way God loves us, with humility and compassion and kindness.

Notes

¹ 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, 219.

² Madeleine L'Engle, in her 1996 book of essays, *Penguins and Golden Calves*, as quoted by Tara Isabella Burton in "Madeleine L'Engle's Christianity was vital to *A Wrinkle in Time*: The new Disney movie has excised L'Engle's faith," March 8, 2018, Vox, available at <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/3/8/17090084/a-wrinkle-in-time-faith-christianity-movie-madeleine-lengle> (accessed March 15, 2018).