

Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

LUKE 13:31-35

## THE RIGHT THING TO DO

One Sunday when Calvin Coolidge was in the White House, he went to church while his wife stayed home. When he returned his wife, while knowing that her husband had a well-deserved reputation for being extremely economical with his words, asked him what the sermon had been about. The President replied, "Sin." [Pause.] "Well, what did the preacher say about it?" "He was against it."

There's bit more to say about sin than that.

Let's start by opening our copies of The Book of Common Prayer (the black book in your pews) to page 848 in the Catechism, the section marked "Sin and Redemption." I invite you to read the answers after I read the questions.

"What is sin?"

"Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people and with all creation."

"How does sin have power over us?"

"Sin has power over us because we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted."

"What is redemption?"

"Redemption is the act of God which sets us free from the power of evil, sin and death."

Please notice that following God's will means that we are free from slavery to sin: "doing our own thing," far from an act of freedom, exhibits our slavery to impulse, desire, to the sin which dwells in us and wants to take us over. Following God's will is the route to freedom, freedom made possible through Jesus Christ.

In ancient times people attributed all sorts of things to sin, sometimes based on little or no evidence. The most notorious biblical example is in John 9 when Jesus' disciples -- *Jesus' disciples!* -- upon seeing a man blind from his birth, asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus' answer was "neither", which some of his pious opponents refused to believe. Once Jesus had healed

the man of his blindness, they cast the man out of their faith group and he became a faithful follower of Jesus.

Heresies tend to come in matched pairs of opposite extremes. So, just as at one time too *much* was attributed to sin, *now* too *little* is being attributed to sin.

Two very healthy developments in the last 100 years have been the greater recognition of mental illnesses as illnesses and the great growth of treatments and even cures for some of them, and the recognition of addictions as illnesses and the great growth of treatments for them that have saved and transformed millions of lives. I believe that the hand of God has been and continues to be deeply involved in both of these progressive developments.

However, some people have taken these developments to mean that sin has ceased to exist, that if any person does anything wrong in whatever sense, it can be attributed solely to an addiction, or an illness, or a condition -- or to their environment, to their upbringing, or to discrimination -- to anything *except their personal responsibility*.

This just in: **personal moral responsibility still exists.** “Wicked” is not just the name of a Broadway musical. It applies to certain actions -- and certain inactions -- which people can be held responsible for, certainly when sober and “in their right minds.”

One of my mentors in the priesthood told me of a cocktail party he had gone to at which the host took him aside and said, “There’s a friend of mine here who would like to speak with you in private.” The host led them to a room in the back of the house where the priest and the woman were seated in chairs across from each other. She proceeded to tell in an emotionless, matter-of-fact tone and in excruciating detail how she had systematically destroyed the lives of some of her one-time friends over the past several years.

At the end of her story, the priest could not help but blurt out, “That’s perfectly *horrible* what you have done!”

She looked at him earnestly and said, “You really think so? I think so too, but my therapist just said how “interesting” my behavior was, so I thought I was going crazy.”

The priest said, “Would you like to re-tell your story as a confession of your sins to God?” “*Oh yes!*” she replied, and with sobs and many tears she repeated her same account, finishing by begging for God’s forgiveness and the grace to try to make amends

to those she had hurt and make a fresh start with her life. The priest gave her absolution, after reminding her that, as a formal confession, he was pledged to secrecy about what she had said, and she was pledged to carry out her commitments. He did not, of course, in telling me this story mention her name, her deeds, the location or year of the party or any identifying information, only exactly what I have told you.

Some time later he bumped into her again. She looked at him intently and said, “You saved my life,” and kept walking.

Recognition by her of her sin, her confession, and God’s forgiveness and grace had led to life-saving change.

“Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ,” St. Paul writes in today’s Epistle. “Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and their glory is their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven...”

It is true that some peoples’ “god” is their “bellies”, that what they put first is their own appetites, in that case for food. Some other people seem to abuse another physical appetite in ways that exploit or degrade people. Guys seem to have a particular proclivity for this type of sin, though not exclusively, and sexual sin brings down the famous and the obscure alike, who have on their records not just their own behavior but the damage done to their victims, whether women or men, adults or children.

The sexual abuse of children is a horrifying part of the vast ocean of sin. Jerry Sandusky is hardly alone among the perpetrators. And I think the Devil takes particular delight in successfully tempting people in positions of trust to be abusers or exploiters, whether family members, family friends, coaches, scout leaders, teachers, or clergy. And too often, institutions have protected the abusers and pilloried the victims.

I come from Boston. Boston was “ground zero” for the child sex abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church in this country.

Bernard Cardinal Law, the Archbishop of Boston who did so much to cover up the scandal, was removed as archbishop and *promoted* to a cushy job in the Vatican.

I know personally of one incident in which our sisters and brothers in Christ only a few miles from here caught the reverberations of the coverup in Boston. There was a Roman Catholic priest in Massachusetts who was convicted in court of child molestation and, incredibly, was neither sent to prison nor defrocked. He was given only probation,

the terms of which included his having no contact with children. So -- he was transferred to New Jersey, beyond the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts courts, and was assigned to a parish...with a day school. Later, in the late 1980's he was assigned to St. Cecilia's in Monmouth Junction. His pastor was not told about his record. Of course, no background checks were done by the parish.

Only when some parishioners spoke with relatives in Boston and the relatives said, "You have *who* as your new assistant priest?" and sent them news clips from the *Boston Globe* did the sordid truth come out. He left that church; I don't know where he went or what subsequently happened.

I hope and pray that whoever is elected Pope next month will take decisive action to purge the Church of this horrific sin *systematically and proactively* in a way which still has not been done. Covering up sins to protect an institution at the sacrifice of priceless children of God is a crime to be judged by the highest judge of all, Almighty God.

The Episcopal Church is not perfect, of course, No human institution is; we have all fallen short of the glory of God. But I do want to share with you that we *do* have a *system* of background checks in The Episcopal Church and in this parish. I myself have undergone a comprehensive background check which not only covered the usual public records but also required references from every living bishop under whom I have served since I was ordained in 1981.

Christ Church also has adopted a policy of appropriate background checks for lay people who serve in particularly sensitive volunteer ministries. In 2012, all nine of our Youth Mentors, our Parish Treasurer and our Assistant Treasurer all went through background checks. Guess what? Every one of them was cleared to continue their ministries as Youth Mentors and financial people. All of which is not exactly a surprise, we chose well, but it is far better to *know* that they are O.K. than to *assume* they are O.K.

We also have Diocesan abuse awareness and prevention training required for clergy, wardens and youth mentors, and bright orange signs are posted in churches which list the phone numbers to which any alleged incidents can be reported. All this should have been done throughout the Episcopal Church generations ago and it wasn't. Denial, as the saying goes, is not just a river in Africa. But the Church should be the institution which is the most aware of the reality of sin in our world, and facing reality needs to start with the Church. We have made progress as a Church in this area.

Sin, as we read in the Catechism, distorts “our relationships with God, with other people, and with all creation.” The last one is another kind of sin of which we as Americans are becoming more aware.

I went to an overnight camp in the early 1960’s before the Environmental Protection Agency was established. My camp was on a river in New Hampshire which was downstream from a paper mill. On a good day the river was slate gray and had sofa-sized globs of industrial waste floating down it which we called “crud bars.” All life in that river, of course, had long since been killed by the people who ran the factory as surely as if the president of the company had personally poisoned every fish and frog.

That was a sin. Nowadays, it’s also illegal. That’s called “progress.”

As some of you know, my wife and I have three dogs. All are “rescues”, adopted from animal shelters. Nine years ago, somebody dumped Bart, our Shepherd mix, on the streets of Newark. Dumped, like a piece of garbage.

He got off easy compared to our females.

Our larger pit bull, Georgia, went to a shelter after her owners went to jail. I want this to be a PG-rated sermon, so I won’t give you details here and now about what her owners had done to people or to her, except to say that if you look in her mouth, you’ll see there’s a piece of her tongue missing.

Our smaller (41 pound) pit bull/boxer mix, Buttercup, landed in the shelter with a conspicuous scar on her head, which she still has. She was so terrified she would cower in the back of her crate in the shelter. You see, smaller, younger, less aggressive female pit bulls are used by dog-fighting rings as *bait* for the large fighting dogs.

Very slowly, Buttercup learned to trust my wife enough to come to the front of the cage when Elda left her a treat there. Eventually, she let Elda touch her, and then walk her. When we decided to foster her (a prelude to adopting her), the question was, would she ever learn to trust a *man*? Whenever I would lift my right arm to brush my hair, she would freak out. That’s a clue with dogs (or with children) about what their experiences had led them to believe would happen to them when a man lifts his right hand.

All three dogs were the victims of sin. It counts when people do it to animals. It counts.

But healing can happen. Now Buttercup climbs up in my lap and licks my face and snuggles in my lap, content, safe and secure. Now I walk Bart and Georgia to the school bus stop in the morning where the elementary school kids pet them before they head off to school. It's good for everybody.

There are lots of kinds of sins, ones of commission -- *doing* something -- and ones of omission -- neglecting to do something good.

I offer a modest objective to myself and to each and all of us for this Lent. Let's each give up one wrong behavior and also give up *not* acting in a situation in which we can do some good, and replace one bad action and one stance of inertia with two good actions.

Let me leave you with one last story.

Some people think that all they have to do to be good is to avoid being really bad, while others ask, "How can I actively love my neighbor as myself given the position I am in and the time I have been given by God?"

In the Vatican's diplomatic service, the position of papal legate in Turkey was considered a backwater. Turkey was and is an overwhelmingly Muslim country with a secular government and a minuscule number of Catholics. The legate was not recognized as an ambassador, at least in the 1930's and '40's, when this story takes place. It would have been easy for a person holding such an office in such a time and such a place to while away the days reading books and drinking really good Turkish coffee and ignoring the tsunami of evil sweeping through Europe.

But the person who held that office in that time did not take that approach. Neither did he hide behind the supposed powerlessness of his position in a vast bureaucracy. He also realized that sometimes doing the right thing means *not* coloring between the lines.

He used his post during World War II in neutral Istanbul to be in close touch with people who had deep knowledge of the horrors in Europe. He urged his superiors to take action, but when they did not, *he did*.

I have heard that there was a ship moored in Istanbul filled with Jewish children fleeing German-occupied territory. The German Government demanded custody of the ship. They had a plan to deal with the Jews.

The papal legate had a plan too. He created baptismal certificates for all of the children and announced that they were all good Roman Catholics under the personal protection of the Pope.

The Nazis blinked.

They let the ship escape to safety.

This was not a fluke, one time act. The papal legate launched what he called “Operation Baptism”. According to testimony at the Nuremberg trials after the war, he arranged for 24,000 baptismal certificates to be smuggled to Hungary, which resulted in 24,000 Jews being spared from the death camps -- all *without*, in fact, requiring them actually to be baptized or to renounce their faith. He also had immigration papers and forged visas smuggled into Nazi-occupied Hungary so that Jews could escape.

Very few people did things like that. Why did he bother? It was the right thing to do.

Some people write wonderful words and then try to live up to them. He *did* things, and then wrote wonderful words to explain them. Years later, from a much more conspicuous platform, the former papal legate wrote, “In her rejection of persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews and by anyone.”

By the time he wrote that, he was known no longer as Mons. Angelo Roncalli, or even as Angelo Cardinal Roncalli, but as Pope John XXIII.

In our own time and with our own opportunities, let’s do the right thing.

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