

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (7/5/20)

It is an easy temptation to let ourselves off the hook. Even those who are more attentive to their sins may, in some cases, downplay their responsibility for certain sins. Why is this? Perhaps we are in some ways ignorant of the sinfulness of an action. With our permissive culture, some things are believed to be our right and entitlement. Perhaps we have justified the sin - told ourselves that there is a very good reason that we did it (for example stealing something from work when you have been shorted on pay). In such cases, we assure ourselves that we are only righting an injustice and therefore we presume that God will judge in our favor. We can forget that someone else's bad behavior does not excuse ours.

Perhaps we have been engaging in the sin for so long a period of time, that it's magnitude becomes less significant to us. This is an especial danger of repeated or habitual sin - that we somehow either give up the fight, or we begin to lose sight of the significance of the sin in order not to feel bad, or admit the repeated failure. All of these involve a lack of appreciation of the reality or significance of our sins. However, in the Gospel today, Jesus explores the degree of sinfulness of actions. When does my anger at stubbing my toe become a sin? When does someone offering me an unjust thing become my responsibility to refuse? When do the base human emotions of anger, lust, or the desire for things become sinful? A danger is to place the bar too high to consider something a sin. We can be tempted to say "it was only a white lie," "it was only a few dollars," "she'll get over the nasty comment," "I can't be responsible for other people," ... "he had it coming"! Jesus directs us to see that passing these things off as lesser misbehavior that is not sin, is not correct. He says "say yes when you mean yes and no when you mean no, anything beyond that is from the evil one," "avoid greed in all its forms," "do unto others as you would have them do to you," and if Jesus were to respond to Cain's question in the wilderness "am I my brother's keeper"? - Jesus would respond "yes."

Today we hear him speak of anger and harm - he begins by quoting the 5th commandment and then expounding upon it. People of his time (as people in ours) can regard only a physical injury to someone a sin - and perhaps only an actual act of taking a life as worthy of being called a mortal sin. God's intent in this commandment is not so narrow. Jesus always presses us to go deeper, always looks to the intentions of the heart (the place from which

sin arises), and always places true love as the measuring stick by which to judge the sinfulness of interactions with another. Jesus broadens the standard for injury beyond the lethal or merely physical. He states that if you publicly dishonor an individual (saying “Raca” or “You fool”), you will face severe punishment. It is not just the injury of the body that is included, but the injury to the person’s dignity, self-worth, and the damage to their public standing and reputation. Gossip also falls under here as when we gossip or speak ill of others behind their back we wound the person and perhaps even kill their reputation. It does not matter if these things are true, just like it does not matter if your boss cheats you on your pay - you don;t get to use that truth for harm. To use the information of the person’s fault or of their vulnerable position in front of a group of people to wound them is an injury that merits God’s response.

Jesus goes one step further. He says that whoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of judgement - not that we have incurred that judgement necessarily, but we are flirting with such judgement. There is a point where the anger dissolves charity to the degree that one cannot abide fully in the Body of Christ - and this is sin. There is a point where our anger becomes a sin of hatred that pushes out the love that is the very presence of the God who is love. Where is that line? - it may be difficult to tell. When does this private behavior, unknown to all but ourselves and God become a sin? - we may not accurately judge. Will this simmering anger lead us to acts of verbal or physical wounding of another in the future? - it might ... and quite unexpectedly. We are playing a dangerous game where we try to dislike a person and be angry with them and not let it cross to hatred and sin. The very act of anger and dislike already diminishes charity. The risk of moving to greater levels of sin is too great.

It seems clear that Jesus regards all such anger as unacceptable. Humanly will these feelings come up to all of us? ... yes. Will we find ready accomplices that will assure us that we are justified in this anger? ... yes we will. Just remember that one of these accomplices will not be Jesus. He calls us to turn not just from the crushing weight of mortal sins, but also of those venial sins that wound our relationship with our God, and in addition, those things which lead us to sin. Why would we place ourselves *in danger of judgement*, we should rather be working to move ourselves and others closer to God. True love may impel us to correct another for their benefit - but wounding another in anger serves no purpose in love - and is not of God.