

Try to Sin a Little Less

Philippians 3: 7-4:1

March 17, 2019

Coming up in just a few weeks is Confirmation Sunday. Since last fall, I have been meeting with the 11 young people in this year's Confirmation Class. Together we have been learning about God- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have been talking about how we live as followers of Jesus, with faith, hope, and love, in a world that makes it harder and harder to be a Christian. Our learning and interaction isn't just limited to our Sunday afternoon meetings. We have an ongoing text message conversation where we share about times that we have experienced God during day to day life, and the joys and struggles that we face every day.

Over the last few weeks, we have been talking about the church. We looked at the history of the Moravian Church- from Hus to Comenius to Zinzendorf, and how the Moravians ended up in Winston-Salem. Then last Sunday we talked about the purpose of the church- why the people of God come together for prayer and praise, and confession and pardon. The conversation about confession and pardon was really interesting. We all agreed that it is important for us to come together and confess our sins. But there was some level of discomfort with the assurance of pardon.

This is the part in the liturgy where the leader says, as we did in our liturgy this morning "*The Lord says: I, even I, am the God who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and will not remember your sins. Go and sin no more.*" While the class was good with the part about God forgiving their sins (blotting out our transgressions) and not remembering our sins, they got a little held up by the "*Go and sin no more.*" So we talked more about it and tried to figure out why we say it and what it means to us and for our faith.

The issue they had was with the way that is worded. The confirmation class heard it as setting an impossible standard. They said that we can't "go and sin no more" because we are all sinners by nature and no matter how hard we try, we are going to sin. So by saying "go and sin no more", we are being set up to fail because it is impossible for us to not sin again. It is inevitable. I had to admit that it was a good point. So I asked them what would be better. We decided that it should be "Try to sin a little less." And I like that. I like it so much that it is my sermon title for today.

Not only did it make a good sermon title, but it also guaranteed that my Confirmation Class would be paying attention to my sermon, since they came up with the title. I was tempted to tell them beforehand that I was using their idea for my sermon title, but I thought it would be more fun to see their surprise and excitement when they saw it in the bulletin this morning. "Try to Sin a Little Less." This morning I want to talk about what it means to try to sin a little less.

At first, it may seem like that is taking the easy way out. Shouldn't we really try to "go and sin no more"? After all, those words come from Jesus himself. In the eighth chapter of John's gospel, the scribes and Pharisees confront Jesus with a woman who had been caught committing adultery. They remind him that in the OT law, Moses commands that such a crime should be punished by stoning. Then they ask him what he thinks should be done. They were trying to trap Jesus, to test him so that they could bring an accusation against him. Jesus' reply is nothing short of brilliant- "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Of course the elders of the people, the scribes and Pharisees, can't respond to that, because they themselves are not without sin. They can't go ahead with the stoning, even though it is what the law commands. Instead they go away, one by one, dropping their stones in the face of their own sins, leaving no one but Jesus and the woman. Jesus asks her where everyone went, who was left to condemn her. "No one,

sir.” Then Jesus says “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

There is a lot of debate among biblical scholars on exactly what Jesus meant by those words. Some believe that it is almost a threat, that Jesus is saying “I will let you off the hook for this one, but if you sin again, I will condemn you.” Others interpret Jesus words as being almost sarcastic “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again. (As if that’s going to happen!)” Still others read those words as very literal “Commit no more sins.” which, of course is impossible.

The biblical scholars in my Confirmation Class hear those words as saying “Go and try to sin a little less” or try to do better, try to be better. The words of Jesus are not as much of a challenge or a command or a threat as they are words of encouragement. He is saying “My children, yes you have sinned and done wrong. But you are forgiven, you are loved. You are not defined by your sins. So forget about the past and look to a better and brighter future. And you will be better, you will do better.”

I’m sure that some people will say that I am reading way too much into those simple words, that I am saying something very different than what Jesus said, than what Jesus meant. And maybe that is true. But I think that the Apostle Paul would have interpreted it in much the same way that I am. Listen again to these words that he wrote to the Philippians:

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...” What Paul is trying to convey here is the ultimate goal of following Jesus- attaining the resurrection of the dead. This is what lies ahead of us, the promise of eternal life. And we attain it, not on our own merits but through the love of Jesus Christ, through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. This is what lies ahead of us, what we are striving for, what we are straining for.

What lies behind us is what is preventing us from attaining our goal, our prize. What lies behind us is our sins. Paul is telling us that he does his best to forget his sins because he knows that is what Jesus does. God says to us that “I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and will not remember your sins.” And through Jesus’ life, suffering, death, and resurrection our transgressions are blotted out and our sins are forgotten. So if Jesus can do it, why can’t we?

Instead of forgetting our sins, we obsess over them. And we obsess over the sins of others. God may blot out our transgressions but we don’t. We relive them over and over and over again. And we condemn ourselves, and each other, over and over and over again. We look for our own righteousness and the righteousness of others to come from our adherence to the Law, or from our ability to avoid sin and not from our faith in Christ. Yet none of us are righteous, not one. Not until Christ makes his righteousness become our righteousness. Not until Christ makes us his own.

And Christ has already made us his own. Through the power of his death and resurrection, Christ makes us his own. When he was lifted up upon the cross, he drew all people to him. Just as God claimed Jesus as his beloved Son, Jesus claims us. And he forgives us and he frees us. He allows us to obtain citizenship in heaven. Yet we still live as citizens of earth. We still live as slaves to sin. We still live as the condemned rather than as the forgiven.

We don't lose all of those things. We hold on to them, we hold on to our failures and our sins. We fail to forget what lies behind and as we do, we fail to strain forward to what lies ahead. When we dwell in the past, in what lies behind, in our sins and failures, then we don't have our eyes fixed on what lies ahead. We aren't looking to claim the prize of our salvation. We waste so much time on the past that we can't even see what lies ahead of us, we can't see our salvation.

We need to imitate Paul. It is time for us to stop looking for glory in our shame, to stop living as citizens of earth. It is time for us to claim our citizenship in heaven and to claim the glory of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the purpose of the season of Lent. It is why many of us, on Ash Wednesday, received the mark of the ashes in the shape of the cross. These reminders of our mortality, of the consequences of our sins, also remind us that our sins are transformed by that same cross. Our penalty is paid, our sins are forgiven, our death will become life.

The weeks of Lent are when we come to terms with our sinfulness and shame, when we confess and repent and forget as we receive the pardon of our Lord Jesus Christ, who endured the cross, disregarding its shame. For us and for our salvation, Jesus offered his life. He suffered and was crucified, he died and was buried. And then on the third day, he rose from death. And we rise with him.

Let us keep our eyes fixed on him. On the one who says “I do not condemn you.” The one who tells us to go our way and to not sin again. For when forget what lies behind us, when we do as he does and remembers our sins no more, then we will try to sin a little less. Each and every time that we are forgiven, we are called to try to do better the next time, we are called to try and be better. Because Christ has made us his own. And we can stand firm in him.

The words that Paul wrote to the Philippians also describe how Jesus feels about us. Jesus loves us and longs for us. We are his joy and his crown. Yet he holds that crown that he offers to us just a little bit above our heads. Not because we aren't worthy of it already for he has made us worthy. He holds it a little about our heads so that we can reach up to it, as we become better and better as we try to sin a little less.

And as we do, as we confess our sins and receive Jesus' pardon, as we go and try to sin a little less, we can stand firm in the Lord, we can stand firm in our Lord. He takes our humiliation and transforms it into glory, into his glory as it becomes our glory, as we become his glory. This is our focus, this is where we should press on toward.

Imagine what our life would be like if we could see ourselves as Jesus sees us, if we would see ourselves as Jesus sees us. If instead of seeing our sins and our shame, we see Jesus' joy and his crown. Imagine if we see ourselves that way and see each other that way. Then we would truly live as citizens of heaven with our minds set, not on earthly things but on the things of God.

Today, let us forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. Let us look to our Savior, who does not condemn us, who does not remember our sins but forgives us of our sins, and let us try to sin a little less.

Amen.