

Psalm 24

- ¹ The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
² for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
³ Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
⁴ Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
⁶ Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Galatians 3:27-29

²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, ^{*} heirs according to the promise.

John 8:2-11

² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' ¹¹ She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

Giving Ground to God

I really enjoyed the discussion we had last Sunday on this issue of violence, police violence against individuals, particularly young black men, and violence against the police, which most recently has been committed by young black men. We didn't agree on everything, but we agreed that more needs to be done to decrease the violence, and that we could all certainly pray about it and make it a point to get to know people of other backgrounds, who look different from us, who

think differently from us, and whose experiences are different from ours - to put it plainly, to get out of our comfort zones.

In a broader sense, I enjoyed the discussion because I think it really rounded out a day in church. I've mentioned to you before that I consider social hour to be a part of church as we mingle and converse with each other; we don't agree on everything, but we have civil discourse and we agree to disagree. That's kind of what the Temple in Jerusalem was like in the first century when Jesus would go there early in the morning to teach. The Temple was a huge structure; the plaza was the size of six football fields, and during festivals thousands upon thousands of people would gather there. Our Gospel passage says, "All the people came to him..." which might be an exaggeration, but the point is that many people came to listen to him and to learn from him - one big community in one place of worship coming together to learn and to share. It wasn't just a worship service. There were prayers and there was teaching. There were questions asked, and people didn't always agree, but it was wonderful nonetheless to be in the house of God and be dialoguing on issues important to everyone. I can imagine Jesus teaching them about forgiveness, and kindness, and God's will that all should live in peace with one another, and the Kingdom of God that supplants all the corrupt kingdoms of this world.

The Temple was also the place where Jesus' enemies came to test him. In today's Gospel lesson we find a lynch mob dragging in a woman *caught in the act of committing adultery*. Now let's get a handle on this. She was engaged in sex with someone, these religious leaders burst into the room, *leave her partner alone* in order to arrest her alone, and cart her off to see Rabbi Jesus. Now remember that Jesus was not the religious authority who would be qualified to pass sentence on this woman; there was a group called the Sanhedrin that would have handled such a trial, so their point is not to execute justice for this woman. Their point is really to put Jesus on trial. Why? Because, as is noted in so many passages in the Gospels, *he was speaking with great authority and he has a lot of followers* - he would have had quite a following on Twitter and a friend requests if he had had a Facebook page - and those who were in the positions of authority in the Temple, or those who sought such positions, felt threatened by Jesus. He was too popular, and he was getting in the way of their personal ambitions. He was invading their comfort zone. This same phenomenon occurs today; if you have a colleague at work who is outperforming you, doing a better job than you, that person is likely to get the promotion that you were waiting for. You might be tempted to discredit this person. And even if we don't act upon our jealousy, our minds may somehow demonize that person so that we oppose that person's ideas simply because they are his ideas and therefore they must be wrong. That's ego-protection and it's just plain evil. Rather than thinking about what is best for the community, we prejudge that *my* way must be the best way simply because it is *my* way. In this case, with this woman caught in adultery, the scribes and Pharisees consider *their* way to be the proper way; strict adherence to the Law of Moses; adulterers receive capital punishment - death by stoning. And if Jesus prescribes otherwise, he will discredit himself as a Jew, because Scripture is quite clear about following the Law - that's how Jews are to honor their God, by obeying the Law.

So what does this upstart itinerant preacher from Galilee do when confronted with this dilemma? The writer says that Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. That was kind of strange for Jesus, who usually had a quick response. Instead he said nothing, so the accusers kept questioning him, and I can't help but feel that a profound sadness must have overcome Jesus. A

human life is in the balance here and all on account of a bunch of men who need to defend their own positions, protect their own territory, so to speak. They are using this woman as a tool to wreck Jesus' career. They think that they have won by asking Jesus a question that will discredit him if he doesn't take their side and say, "Of course she must be killed; she's broken the Law of Moses." Those Laws had been the glue that bonded the Jewish community together for over a thousand years; is Jesus the Jew going to dismiss the Law so easily?

What Jesus does is appeal to common ground. The common ground is that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God, a fact that everyone who knows themselves knows to be true. And as fastidious as the scribes and the Pharisees are attending to every detail of the Law in their personal lives, they nonetheless acknowledge this common ground of universal sin by the fact that they don't start throwing stones at this woman. As passionately as they pursue righteousness, as much as they feel themselves set apart from the masses by their level of self-righteousness, the scribes and Pharisees must admit that sin is something they have in common with the rest of the human race.

The common ground of sin is not prime real estate. In fact, sin is why we can't seem to get along very well on the common ground we call the Earth; everyone is out to defend some territory they claim to be their own. Sin is what alienates us, not only from God but from one another; I think it's worth noting that that scribes and Pharisees depart one by one, not together as a group. Sin separates us, one from another. They came in together as a group, and left one at a time. Our sin can allow us to cooperate and organize in order to sin against people we don't like – think of Nazi Germany or the war between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. Think of any organization committed to doing something evil – it eventually disintegrates because when it runs out of people to attack outside the organization, it starts attacking people *within* the organization. And if it were allowed to continue attacking there would be one single person left in the end. That is the end result of sin; self isolation from humanity and from God.

The scribes and the Pharisees believed that the Law of Moses would somehow bring them back into relationship with God, but laws won't do that. Laws are designed to limit our sin. The law permits us to obtain things that we can call our own and keep others from taking those things away from us. The law discourages people from taking what someone else claims is theirs (their life, their property, and their privacy) by imposing prison terms, or even the death penalty, on those who take from others and get caught and get convicted. The law permits us to have personal space, and allows us to protect that space.

But the law does not prevent us from sinning. We can amass huge fortunes and build great fortresses and own acres of property and hire armed security guards to keep everyone off of our property and call it all "MINE" and be fully within the confines of the law, even though the Psalmist writes that "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." We can believe that we are better than others based on our gender or ethnicity or our spirituality and never pay a fine for harboring such beliefs, even though Paul writes that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

I suppose the only Law that brings one into proper relationship with God is the one about loving God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, but the scribes and the Pharisees didn't know how to do that; the very Son of God was standing in front of them, and they sought to destroy him even as they claimed to be loving God. **Loving Jesus Christ is our best shot at loving God**, and loving Jesus means obeying him, and obeying him means surrendering to his will, which is giving up ground to God. Jesus doesn't ask for a limited surrender; he asks for a full commitment, and he prompts us to get out of our comfort zones when he commands things like *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*. I don't know of anyone, including myself, who is very good at loving his enemies, but whenever we go through the motions, whenever we make kind gestures towards our enemy, whenever we show restraint and patience and attempt to dialogue with our enemy, we are giving up ground to God.

Sin is the common ground that divides us; Christ is the common ground that unites us. It doesn't just unite Christians with one another. It unites all of humanity as we seek to love even those who would try to hurt us. It's the example Jesus set as he carried his cross to Calvary, and once nailed upon it could look up to the sky and say, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." We were the enemy that Jesus loved. May we be transformed more and more into his friends as we honor and serve him, as we give up our selfishness and cede more and more of our personal space to God, and find that once those borders around ourselves are torn down that we are better able to reach out to others, to understand them and love them as Christ loves them.