

3-5-2023

Second Sunday in Lent

I am very grateful for the contents of the Book of Common prayer. Our forebears understood thoroughly the human condition as taught in the Bible, and this comes through especially in the collects. In today's prayer, we see the language of "body and soul," along with the understanding that humanity is a unity of these two essential aspects. We are not primarily physical. We are not primarily spiritual. We are an integration of spirit and matter, of body and soul. A spirit without a body is not a person; maybe it is a ghost. A body without a spirit is ... well ... dead.

And we also see in our collect, that we humans are weak, and we lack self-existence. Our being and our health comes to us from outside, so we have no intrinsic power to help ourselves. Some think that this is a pretty bleak assessment of the human condition. Perhaps I might say a pretty realistic assessment, and it is, in fact, a truthful statement. If we get ill, is there any act of the will that will heal us? Some have claimed this, but in reality, I cannot will myself better. I am dependent upon the healing abilities of my body, created in me, given to me, by God. I am dependent on God for my continued being. To remain well, I must also receive the gifts of God provided to us in food. I cannot create sustenance for myself. I also must exercise and move so that my body retains some strength. I can abuse myself, which leads to weakness and disorder and disability, but I cannot heal myself. I can only care for my body so that its healing abilities are supported. Again, we are reminded of Adam and Eve. They brought death into the world, but they could not undo that which they had done. Only God could restore us again to our original spiritual health through the saving work of Christ.

Because we are an integrated body and soul, we must acknowledge that what we do with our bodies impacts our souls. When we abuse our bodies by eating junk food, we will feel badly and not be able to function well to the glory of God. Likewise, when we commit sin through our bodies, our souls suffer a separation from God. We might also sin through our thoughts or careless words or thoughtless outbursts, which again separates us from God, and will have an eventual impact upon our bodies. Sin brings decay and death. Only God can bring life.

Further evidence of the integrated nature of our being is found in the doctrine of the General Resurrection. The Bible teaches and the Creeds assert that all of us will be reunited with our bodies at the end of this world, when we will face judgement along with those who remain. God will remake the world and will remake us who are judged faithful by the blood of Christ. According to St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, we will be given “spiritual” bodies, which are still physical, but will have been transformed into a perfection of being that is not subject to corruption or death. What this mode of existence precisely is like is beyond any telling, but it will no doubt exceed all of our ideas.

This doctrine is not what most people in our country believe. Unfortunately, I don't even think most American Christians believe this. They have heard about the importance of the body to the being of the person, but I believe that they haven't really considered the implications of this doctrine. Rather we tend to follow the ancient heresy called Gnosticism. This name comes from the Greek word, “gnosis,” referring to a secret knowledge that its adherents claimed to have. This system of thought disparaged matter. It considered matter to be evil, and it therefore considered liberation from matter, freedom from the body, to be an elevated state of being. This philosophy invariably worked itself out either through extreme asceticism or extreme hedonism.

Why is this so? Well, on the one hand, if matter (and therefore the body) was evil, it had to be disciplined and treated abusively. Thus a certain sense of self-loathing arose in some schools of gnosticism. On the other hand, if the body isn't intimately connected to the self, if it isn't the “real essence” of a person, then one can do whatever he pleases with it, and the real soul will remain unaffected. Hence hedonism. But this fundamental assumption—the separation of body and soul—really isn't so. Furthermore, if one abuses his body through hedonistic living, health of body and soul will both suffer, perhaps even to the point of death, where your soul is forcibly separated from your body until the general resurrection.

As mentioned, this idea that the soul is the “real” person and the body is a necessary but unfortunate appendage is prevalent in the world today. It is common to hear individuals referring to freeing the soul from the prison of the body. And much of the gender confusion today is basically gnosticism. “My real self is not reflected by this body, so I will cut and paste the bits and pieces I want, to get the body that I want.” Unfortunately this results in horrific suffering, both physically and spiritually, for many

people. Even those who haven't resorted to medical treatment are very confused about who they are. They have been lied to about the nature of human beings, and some have done irreversible damage to themselves.

On the other hand, Christianity encourages the view that our being is a gift. God has given me this body, and I am to receive it with gratitude, and be a thoughtful steward of my body, a virtuous steward of my soul. We want to eat well – not gluttonously, not stuffing ourselves with food that is bad for us. We want to worship well, serving our God with joy and gladness within the Body of Christ and within the world.

The connection between body and soul cannot be broken. What we do with our bodies impacts our souls. Are we then to believe that all the bad that happens to us is due to misuse of our bodies? Or is due to our individual sin? Of course not. Our aging and eventual deaths are a result of the sin of humanity. God promised to Adam and Eve, "... for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." This is the ultimate cause of our degradation unto death. Bad things will happen to us, to our bodies. All the preventative care and careful eating in the world will not keep us from getting sick or ill. But this doesn't mean that we either can detest or ignore our bodies and our health.

As we must care for our bodies as best we can with food and exercise, so likewise we must not abuse our bodies sexually. Paul explicitly calls us to abstain from fornication. Possess your "vessel," ie your physical body, in sanctification and honor, not in the lust of concupiscence. That is a funny word – it refers to our bodily desires and lusts which are a degradation of holy desires. Eating is important. We must take in food. But we should not be ruled by our desire for food, and thus we must exercise ourselves to have mastery over our desire for food. "Man shall not live by bread alone": in essence bread, food, apart from God is a disorder. Our ultimate sustenance is the Word of God. This is one of the reasons we fast: it helps us see beyond the gift of food to God, the ultimate Source of food and life.

Likewise, we are given a desire for ... let us say... activities that cause children to be born. Within marriage, such activities are good and healthy and enjoyable and commanded even. I would even say they were heavenly for they show us a glimpse of the life of the world to come. But unordered desires will destroy us in multiple ways, and they lead to the objectification of others. Do you rule your desires or do they rule

you? In our readings we are admonished that, "every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour."

So today, through our readings and the collect, Christ calls us to holiness. This call is always set before us, but it especially rings out to us during Lent. The conundrum, however, is how we are to achieve this task if "we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves," as the collect says. Allow me to suggest three practical things that may help.

First, take your sin seriously. As Anglicans, we do a lot of confessing. We confess during Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Holy Communion, and throughout the day if we pray the Lord's prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Regular confession makes us keenly aware of our sin, and the death that it works in us, but can also blunt us to the seriousness of sin if we just say words without consciously considering what we are asking. Thus we should make a habit of being specific about the sins that we confess. During times of confession, pause, if only for a few moments, and really take stock of your recent actions. Christ suffered for those sins. Do not speed through confessions thoughtlessly.

And be reminded that sin isn't just what we do with our bodies, but Christ points us to our hearts. If we allow our concupiscence to take root in our hearts at any given time, then we have fallen into sin. We have lusted after food or sex or we have been carried away with anger or bitterness or greed. Outside we may appear holy, but the heart is desperately wicked. Only God knows what lusts are hidden there. We must seriously consider this every moment, taking every thought captive to the holiness of Christ by the holiness of Christ. Incidentally, I will mention it once again, that sometimes our sins don't seem to let us go. We have retained the minor sacrament of confession for such cases. It is healthy to unburden our souls from the sin that weighs us down. Lent is a fitting time to make a confession if you desire to hear, as objectively declared by the Church in the authority of Christ, that you are free from sin.

That leads us to the second very important principle for living pure and righteous lives. We must receive seriously the forgiveness that Christ has won for us. Having confessed your sins, they are forgotten by God. They are no longer held against you. You may have the consequences of those sins to work through in this life, but Christ and the Church will help you through those issues. It is important to learn to put sin behind you, not to allow it to define you. This is difficult, because while forgiveness

is an objective reality, it takes time for that understanding to penetrate a guilty heart. You are no longer a sinner, but you are a child of God, a joint heir with Christ, and a member of the eternal community of the faithful in the Church. You are now, and daily you are becoming more so, a holy person, being built into the temple of God founded upon Jesus Christ the Chief corner stone. Practically, what does this mean? How do I live this out daily?

It means that every day is a new day in Jesus Christ. You may fail today, but confess your sins, receive the forgiveness of Christ, and then do better tomorrow. Forgiveness is real. You are a loved child of God, made holy in Christ, and learning everyday to be more holy, to better incarnate the life of God in this world. Do not believe that you have sin that Christ cannot forgive. He died for those sins and they are forgiven indeed. Our hearts might condemn us, but Jesus does not. His love is stronger than our sin. Receive forgiveness and then go and sin no more.

The last point is one that I've mentioned before, but I believe it bears repeating. Be motivated by love for Jesus. Do not rely upon personal strength. We are powerless of ourselves to help ourselves. Let your imagination be shaped by the goodness of God and learn to be grateful above all else for the blessings of Christ. Trying harder through an act of the will does not lead to long-term success, and usually results in bitterness. It is better to love doing what is good, than to obey in bitterness and resentment. We want to be joyful people, not embittered people.

Finally, I'd like to draw our attention to the last line of the epistle lesson, which is key to all of the three aforementioned points. God has also given unto us His Holy Spirit. Let us desire that the Spirit would live large within us. We want to be filled, every bit of our souls and therefore every bit of our bodies, with the Spirit of God so that the lust that resides in our hearts is displaced, so that the demons that afflict us and lead us away from God would be expelled, so that the pain of the body which slowly, but persistently, leads us to death in this life, would not become grounds for a rejection of God, but rather a sign of the fullness of redemption that awaits.

Where does this lead? "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; ... For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness." Our souls have been healed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and it is He that will strengthen us in our bodies, and keep and guard our souls. Receive with thankfulness, the good gifts of

God: our bodies, our being, and our sustenance. May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts completely driving away all destructive and ungodly desires. May our thoughts, words, and deeds be worthy of our redemption. And may our lives reflect the beautiful holiness of God to the world around us.

AMEN