



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

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Sermon for the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 27
St. Mark's on the Campus
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SIN IS THE TOPIC OF THE DAY! Priest Sidnie's Sermon last week on Saints felt so good! It made me think of Saint and Sinner...

I smiled at that thought because at my Dad's restaurant there was an item on the menu called Saint and Sinner. It was lobster and steak. If you asked which one was the saint, the answer was, "you decide." What if you had that much freedom in your self to decide who is a saint and who is a sinner? Here's the tricky part...could it be both saint & sinner mixed? Our church encourages you to think for yourself and make mature decisions. Freedom like this offends some people. Will you accept the church as your authority for determining what is sin and what is not? Or, who is a sinner and who is not? And what does the church teach about sin? The syndicated columnist Cal Thomas wrote that it would be helpful if the leaders of the Episcopal Church could tell its members what it regards as sinful behavior. He is concerned that the concept of sin will be up for negotiation in order to avoid giving offense to anyone. Well, I was offended by his column because it was misleading. Tell me, could it be sinful to use one's professional training and platform as a nationally syndicated columnist to distort perceptions and encourage people to leave a church? How about my procrastination in writing to him to let him know his words are hurtful? Is that a sin?

Of course, there is an element of truth in Cal Thomas's accusation. We don't talk much about sin. Episcopalians and others might think we, as a denomination, are as wishy-washy as Cal Thomas charges. Another characteristic of the Episcopal Church contributes to this problem of perception! This church doesn't try to defend itself. I might wish we were different, but I think we're following Christ's model in choosing not to defend ourselves. When I start defending myself, I get focused on justifying my position, and it definitely takes my attention away from God! So, Cal Thomas entitled his commentary **Church L I T E**, and I can see where he's coming from. I can see where our church is coming from too. One of the reasons I encourage people to take the Education for

Ministry program is to help them understand Christianity and why our church is the way it is so that we can make a contribution to the public discourse! Well, let's get back to the topic of sin!

In the past month we've had some public scandal under the category of sexual misconduct, one a Congressman, one an Evangelical pastor. Have you thought about the sin in each of those cases? I loved hearing a radio interview of the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Robert Mahler. He said, "Evangelicals shouldn't be surprised by sin! We know what sin is!" Actually, no Christian should be surprised by sin. Saint Paul says it all in Romans: For All have sinned...did you hear that, ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Later he says—in Romans 7:15—“

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ...So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. for I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

That is right out of the Bible. You can't cut it both ways. If Jesus paid the price, and you have committed your life to Christ, you are forgiven. This is not just a line or 2 in the scriptures! Paul goes on page after page asserting that sin is not the predominant issue for Christians! Why are the Evangelicals making it seem like it is? Their focus on it is a distortion of the scripture! Here's how Paul says it in Romans 5:8: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." It is ok for you to claim that as one of God's great gifts! You do not have to clean yourself up before you're good enough for Jesus or God! You, all of us can live into the free gift of God, the grace and mercy granted us through Jesus. This is what we do on Sunday mornings. We worship. We draw near to God through faith in the Son Jesus. There is a model each Sunday for cleaning the slate of transgressions, it's called the confession. We have provisions in our church for making a specific and personal confession by setting an appointment with the priest if that helps you receive the forgiveness.

What else do we need to know about Sin. The basics are on page 848, in the Catechism in *The*

Book of Common Prayer. Some teachers use a football analogy to teach this...

here's God, here's sin, here's the people, and Jesus runs an end run around sin and makes a touchdown! He gets to God, he's the star, the winning quarter back. Here's another analogy ...people are shooting arrows but they can't hit the bull's eye without Jesus. With Jesus, they hit the Bull's Eye every time. E. V. Hill, a famous African American preacher in Los Angeles, teaches that we are saved positionally...if we have placed our lives in Jesus' care, when God looks down, Jesus is covering those people and their sins. It's the blood of the lamb that saves us! We are covered by the blood! Another way to say it is Jesus is our champion pleading our case before God the judge.

My own experience with sin is that I could hardly utter the word because I was so controlled by guilt and shame. Now I can sin freely! Yes, I feel badly about myself for mistakes, transgressions, wasting food is the sin I heard about most as a child. I still struggle to properly value food. Hey! God made us this way and God loves us! We should have a Sinners' Anonymous group. I'm Christine and I'm a sinner. My current definition of sin is anything that hurts me or others.

Would it help you to focus more on sin? When a person is focusing on cleaning up sin in order to be acceptable to God, the person becomes self-centered and perfectionistic. What if I were preaching on gluttony? If you don't participate in that you might allow yourself to feel superior. If you do, you might feel guilty and beat yourself up. You probably would never talk to me about food again. You might try to catch me committing that sin at the next potluck. You might try to control your eating better. But what if I talk about the love of God and you come away saying, Gee, God loves me. That's all I need. I don't need to fill up that hole inside with something that cannot satisfy. Maybe you'd say, "Jesus not only finds me acceptable, but God's Holy Spirit actually dwells in me. Perhaps I should treat myself as I would treat a Saint. My strategy for dealing with sin is to focus on Jesus, love, joy, peace...it's what the church teaches, and St. Paul preaches...patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. "And whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Phillippians 4:8.)

You can focus more attention on sin. You can debate the validity of original sin. You can categorize sin into venial and mortal, it's like misdemeanors and felonies. But don't forget, the teaching of the church is based on four thousand years of people's experience of God. The teaching is this, if God has forgiven, it's forgotten. If you keep going back to God and saying, "what about this sin?" God will say, "what sin?" You can think about where your God belief starts: do you start with the goodness of creation or with the idea that the heart of humans is exceedingly wicked? The faith and practice of our church is thanksgiving in response to God's gift. If you work from there and become sensitive to the Holy Spirit, you will grow into more and more respectful treatment of yourself, others and our environment...

Please remember! The scriptures themselves don't focus on sin. Just look at the ones for today: neither the meal nor the oil failed, it was safe for the widow of Zaraphath to trust God. The widow's mite was acceptable to God; beware of the scribes; and Christ sacrificed, once for the sins of many, will come again, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

That's us!

I think you get where I'm coming from. If you want more teaching on sin, we can oblige. Public conversation about these topics is very misleading about what Christianity is and it's misleading about the decision-making process in our church. Let me tell you a little incident from real life.

My uncle served in Vietnam then was hired by the Los Angeles Police Department. He worked there for 30 years. Riding with him one day, the oncoming driver waved. He said that was a sign of a guilty conscience. He said he'd bet money that that driver had unpaid tickets or outstanding warrants. To me it was just friendly. I grew up in Western Nebraska where drivers would wave at each other as they passed...like this, hand at 12 o'clock on the steering wheel and lift up the index finger as the oncoming car approaches. Well, Uncle John's experience is different from mine. I didn't like Uncle John's assumptions of guilt. Here's the deal...our freedom to worship and not focus on sin makes some policemen nervous. But our church's teaching and the Bible assures you...Your outstanding warrants and my outstanding warrants are taken care of before they get to the Judge.