

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 6, 2022

Vice or Virtue

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

God hates sin. That's about the only thing I am willing to say with 100% confidence that God hates. Other things? I'm less certain, mostly because the witness of Scripture seems to suggest that hating is not really in God's nature. Loving on the other hand...there's a plethora of Scriptural evidence to suggest that loving is a major part of God's nature.

So, God hates sin. Given that belief, I am regularly surprised at God's willingness to work in the midst of sinful people and sinful situations. As a matter of fact, God seems extraordinarily good at taking our sin and working some good out of it. Now, please don't hear that as condoning sin or that somehow sin is a part of God's plan (don't get me started on that problematic teaching)! But in the midst of the messiness of human brokenness and sin, God seems to be constantly trying to use whatever predicament we find ourselves in to bring about healing, wholeness, and reconciliation.

There are numerous examples of this in both the Old and New Testaments. King David and Bathsheba spring readily to mind. David sinned greatly in arranging Uriah's death in battle out of his covetousness of Uriah's wife. God was mightily displeased with David and exacted a terrible price from him. In the midst of all of this though, through the prophet Nathan God teaches David humility; a trait that likely kept him from following in Saul's footsteps to his own demise.

Jacob is the archetype of a trickster figure, repeatedly sinning against his brother Esau, his father-in-law Laban, and even against his own father, Isaac. Committing fraud in order to get the patriarchal blessing is most definitely a sin! Stealing from your father-in-law, even if you can justify it in your own head, is definitely a sin too! But God works through Jacob's broken nature and stays with him, eventually changing his name to Israel and promising to make a great nation out of his lineage.

I like to think of God as a great improviser, probably because I'm partial to improvisation. I understand that the title improviser is not all that accurate for God, but oh well! God is outside of time, so of course God knows the past, present, and future. But for those of us who are limited by time, it doesn't much matter since we cannot even conceptualize a reality outside of the flow of time. So, it's a moot point...let me have this!

God takes broken, limited reality and does amazing things with it. God takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary. God takes sin and flips it on its head! And God can do this even in the face of the ultimate tempter, Satan. I raise all of this up for you because I am amazed at what Jesus does in the face of these temptations. No, not just the resisting of them...but rather his turning of them into something good, at least later on in his ministry.

What's the first temptation Satan puts in front of Jesus? Stones into bread, right? And Jesus resists this temptation quite well. Better than I would have after a forty day fast, I can tell you that! But even beyond that, only 5 chapters after this one, in Luke 9, Jesus will be taking five loaves and two fish and feeding a multitude. Almost as though he turned the stones around Bethsaida into bread! Or we can advance even further in Luke's Gospel, to chapter 22 where we will find Jesus taking ordinary Passover bread and turning it into the bread of life, his very flesh for the sake of the world. It's almost as though Jesus takes the vice of selfishness that Satan puts in front of him and flips it into the virtue of charity.

The next temptation is power over all the kingdoms of the world. The vice of power is a strong temptation that has seduced many in human history away from God and God's desires for creation. How does Jesus respond in the face of the powers arrayed against him? Think of the charge the Sanhedrin will level against Jesus when they bring him before Pilate in Luke 23? "They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king'" (Luke 23:2). And of course, Jesus is a king. Just not the sort of king we expect. Jesus takes the vice of power and shows the virtue of humility instead. His crown will be thorns and his throne a cross.

Then there's the last temptation, putting God to the test. In the end this is perhaps the greatest temptation for humanity because the vice behind it is self-idolatry. What are we saying when we try to put God to the test? Ultimately, we are saying that we are more important than God; important enough that God must cater to our desire for proof, or control, or however we

are trying to “flex” on God. Jesus takes this vice of self-idolatry and turns it into the virtue of fidelity to God or faithfulness. His preaching and teaching will bear this out again and again; but perhaps the greatest example of this is shown on the Mount of Olives. In Luke 22:42 we hear Jesus utter this prayer of submission: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”

All of the vices Satan used to tempt Jesus end up, not only **not** working, but Jesus even draws some sort of virtue out of them. What an amazing thing! What an amazing God! It makes we wonder what would happen if we were to truly confess our sins to God and give our vices over to God’s dealing.

God takes the broken and uses it, uses them! But we have a hard time trusting that don’t we? What would it take, this Lent, to truly give up to God our sin and vice and shame? Can you do it? Can you lift up to God exactly those things of which you are most ashamed? Are you willing to stand naked and vulnerable before God your maker and redeemer? Are you willing to dredge up all of the dirt and nastiness of your life so that God can do something with even that?

I don’t know about you, but I find the prospect of that absolutely terrifying. Yet at the same time, there’s something profoundly appealing in the thought too. How freeing must it be to be able to let it all out; admit to it all. And, given the witness of Scripture, what amazing thing might God be able to tease out of the dreck and mire of my sin? What virtue might Christ pull out of all of my vices? These thoughts scare me, which likely means it’s the direction I am being called to go. I’m not sure I can do it, but maybe with my siblings in Christ to lean on, I can.

Will you join me this Lent? Join me in trying to lay ourselves bare before God. Join me in saying to God that we’re going to try to mean what we say we in the rite of confession and forgiveness. Join me in daring to lift before God the entirety of who we are, the good, the bad, and the ugly; and trusting that God can take this evil and turn it on its head. Trusting that God is going to love us no matter what and is going to use us to share God’s amazing love and grace, which is even for us poor sinners too!

Amen.