

A Sermon on St. Augustine

In the Church Calendar that you can find at the beginning of your copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, you will note that today is the feast day of Augustine of Hippo. I believe strongly in expository preaching, and it is my usual practice to preach on the lectionary readings for the day. However, I am now officially a member of the faculty here at Trinity, and, as one of the first exercises of the freedom and authority granted me by my new position, I am going to depart from the liturgically correct position, and preach a topical sermon. I have decided to disregard the lectionary readings entirely and preach on St. Augustine instead. Please do not try this in your homiletics class.

Augustine, as I'm sure you all know, is perhaps the most important theologian in the Western Church. He is claimed as an authority by both Catholics and Protestants – although both sides would claim that the other side had misunderstood him. Augustine has certainly been important for Anglicans. You may have noticed that his portrait is on the Trinity iconostasis on the wall outside the library. There's a gap of about a thousand years between Augustine's picture and Wycliffe's, but I have always assumed that was because Trinity ran out of money or space before they could finish adding the portraits on the left side of the wall.

Augustine was very important in my own theological development. I grew up in a free church Evangelical denomination, where it was more or less assumed that the Holy Spirit disappeared between the death of the apostle John (who died shortly after writing the book of Revelation) and the Reformation. If you look at the Trinity wall, you know better. The Spirit came back for Augustine. I read Augustine's *Confessions* as an undergraduate, and my eyes were opened. He led me into the world of theology and church history. I can safely say that I am standing here now because I read

Augustine as an undergraduate.

What can seminarians at Trinity School for Ministry learn from Augustine? I'd like to mention quickly just a few quick points, and I'd like to focus on points that usually don't appear in the standard Protestant readings.

I would like to look at what Augustine says about the relationship between salvation and what we might call spirituality. This has often not been noticed in the West because, since Anselm, we have focused on questions of forgiveness of sins as the heart of salvation, and have somewhat forgotten the earlier church's emphasis on salvation as participation in the divine life. For Augustine, salvation is about dwelling in God. The goal of life is to know and love God.²

First, there is desire. Augustine says that all human action is motivated by desire. We are born to want things, and everything we do is motivated by some desire for something we want.

Second, there is happiness. Augustine says what we want most is happiness. Augustine goes so far as to say that happiness is the one thing we cannot help but want. I could ask you why you had bought a new pair of running shoes, and you might respond: Because I'm taking up jogging. If I asked you why you were taking up jogging, you might respond, Because I need to lose ten pounds. If I asked why you wanted to lose ten pounds, you might respond that your doctor said you needed to lose weight for your health. If I asked why you wanted to be healthy, we would finally reach the answer that Augustine says lies behind every question: Because it would make me happy. If I were to ask you why you wanted to be happy, Augustine would say the only answer you could give is because you just do.

Then, there is the good. Augustine says that what makes us

happy is the good, and we cannot help desiring what we think is good, or at least what we think is good for us. That might sound paradoxical, because after all, Augustine is famous for believing in original sin. And sin is certainly not good. But Augustine responds that even when we sin, we're desiring something that we think is good (at least for us), and that we think will make us happy. Bank robbers rob banks because it is good to have money to buy good things. Even violence and murder are about having power or vengeance for hurt or wounded pride, and we perceive these as good things. The problem of sin is that some of the things we think are good for us, are not really good for us, or they're good in the wrong way. So, yes, it is good to have money to buy things. It is not good to rob banks to get the money.

And, finally, there is God. God is the Good. Where other things are good because God created them, God simply is Good or Goodness himself. Because God is good, everything God creates is good. When we desire good things, we think we want the thing, but what we really want is the happiness that we can only get from the God, who alone is truly good, and who make all of the good things. They are, as it were, a kind of bait, to lead us to God. There is a famous section in Augustine's *Confessions* where he "questions the creatures" about what he is seeking. He questions the earth, the sea, the living creatures, and, finally, the whole world if they are what he is seeking. And creation responds: "No. We are not what you are seeking. But he made us."³

Another way of putting this is to say that Augustine's theology is about truth and love. The connecting link in all of Augustine's discussion about desire, and happiness, and goodness, and how they relate to God, is truth and love. Truth, is, as it were, the reality of all things. God, who creates all things, is the source of all truth, and so, God is Truth itself. The love by which we desire all things, and seek the good which makes us happy, eventually reaches back to God

himself, who, as Goodness itself is also Love itself. We see this in Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, where the Word, who became flesh in Jesus, is God's Word of Truth, and, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is the Love with which the Father and the Son love each other for all eternity. Creatures are the expressions of God's Wisdom and Love, and in salvation, we return to our creator by learning to know and love him.

In one of Augustine's more famous prayers, he provides a nice summary:

Too late loved I You, Beauty so old and so new! Too late I loved you! And behold, you were within, and I abroad, and there I searched for you; Deformed I, plunged amid those fair forms which You had made. You were with me, but I was not with You. Things held me far from You, which, unless they were in You, were not at all. You called, and shouted, and burst my deafness. You flashed, shone, and scattered my blindness. You breathed fragrance, and I drew in breath and panted for You. I tasted, and hunger and thirst. You touched me, and I burned for Your peace.⁴

So that is Augustine's description of both our situation and our problem. On the one hand, God is absolute Love and absolute Goodness. God has made us for himself, and we cannot rest until we rest in him. God intends to draw us back to him by desire, and he has created a world of good things so that we might, through our desire for good things, be led to him, the source of all this goodness that draws our desire. The problem is, that we never get past the good things to learn to love the one who made them. We end up loving the things that God has made, and we forget about the God who made them. We hope that the good things can satisfy our desires, but they cannot. Only the God who has made us for himself can do that. So we keep seeking and we keep looking. We try to satisfy our desire for God with substitutes, and it just does not work.

And, even if we try to love God instead of things, we end up becoming proud of the good job we've done, and pride is a form of loving ourselves instead of God. So we're back where we began.

How do we solve our problem? Augustine understood that Jesus is the only solution for our problem. Augustine understood that if we are going to change, we have to change from the inside out, and we can not change ourselves. But Jesus can change us—from the inside out.⁵

The first thing that Jesus does is teach us. He teaches us a number of things. First, he reminds us that what we are seeking is not here. Second, Jesus shows us by his example how much God loves us, so that we do not despair that we can never escape the trap we've gotten ourselves into. Finally, Jesus shows us what kind of people we are. He shows us that we are weak, so that we do not become proud. Our strength is not enough, and we need his.⁶

The second thing that Jesus does is that he rescues us, and he rescues us not by power, but by righteousness. The devil loves power, and so do we. But the more we love power, the more we hate righteousness. Jesus delivered us from the power of the devil by the powerlessness of his death. By the shedding of his innocent blood, he paid for us debtors what he did not owe, and he put righteousness before power.⁷

Finally, in his resurrection, the Jesus who put righteousness before power by the powerlessness of his death, defeated the power of the devil by the power of a life that overcame death. So, Jesus conquered the devil, first by righteousness, and, second, by the kind of power that overcomes the powerlessness of death.⁸

Now, for Augustine's final step. How does all of this apply to us? How do Jesus' teaching, his crucifixion, and his

resurrection, rescue those of us who are trapped in a world of desire, who love the creatures rather than the Creator who made us for himself? How do we find rest for our restless hearts?

Augustine's answer is that God leads us back to himself through Christ. Because Christ is the second person of the Trinity, he is the Wisdom of God. Change comes from within as we come to know and love the Christ who is the wisdom of God. And, as we come to know Christ, we come to enjoy God.⁹ It is interesting to contrast Augustine's approach with Pelagius, his great adversary. Pelagius believed that we could change ourselves through changing ourselves.¹⁰ Through sheer effort, through power of the will, and self-discipline, we can change ourselves to be the kind of people we would like to be. Augustine realized that self-discipline would not enable us to become the kind of people we would like to be because ultimately our desires are backwards. Because we enjoy the things God has made rather than the God who made them, all the will-power in the world will not change us. What we need to do is to first is to enjoy God, and when we enjoy God, we can then love God's justice and goodness. As we come to know the God who has loved us in Christ, we come to know him as the one who loves us, and the one gives us all things in love. And that realization leads to enjoyment. Our restless hearts then rest in God.

For Augustine, however, this is not a simple overnight process. It is not a once-for-all moment of being knocked off your horse on the Damascus road—although Augustine himself had experienced such a radical conversion. Learning to enjoy God takes time. It takes place through a process of what we might call here at Trinity School for Ministry, “spiritual formation.” Augustine's writings assume that there are several steps that are part of this process – and I'm going to list some of them quickly.

Living in Christian community was one of them. Augustine started his own monastic community right after his conversion. Later he became a bishop, where he spent his days preaching to and living with his fellow Christians.

Getting to know the story of the Scriptures, and learning to see one's own story in the Scriptures was another. Many of Augustine's writings are sermons on the Scriptures, and his other writings are filled with Scriptural quotations. Augustine's emphasis on reading Scripture became the foundation of the monastic practice of *Lectio Divina*, or divine reading.

Prayer was a third—both private prayer and corporate prayer. Augustine's *Confessions* is one long prayer. The monastic tradition of the Daily Office grew out of Augustine's focus on corporate prayer.

And, of course, finally, there is worship, or the liturgy. Augustine speaks in the *Confessions* of how his life began to change when he began attending the liturgy to hear St. Ambrose preach.

If this sounds even vaguely familiar, it should. You are at Trinity School for Ministry, and a great deal of what will you will be doing and learning in the next few years will be an exercise in spiritual formation that, in much of its basic outlines, goes back to Augustine. When you go to chapel and pray Morning Prayer every morning, think of Augustine. When you study biblical theology in your Scripture courses, remember Augustine! When you pray with your fellow seminarians, or receive the eucharist, you are engaging in Augustinian spiritual formation. Augustine's picture may be way over on the left side of the wall outside the library, but he has a long shadow.

In your time here at Trinity, may you learn to enjoy God. May your restless hearts find rest as they rest in him. And when

you pass by that picture on the library wall, pray a short prayer of thanksgiving.

1 The kind of reading of Augustine I am talking about can be found in Ellen T. Charry, "Dwelling in the Dignity of God: Augustine of Hippo," *By The Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 120-152; Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Augustinian Alternative," *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 146-163 and "The Augustinian Conception of Moral Enquiry," *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 82-104.

2 The following is my paraphrase of material found in *Augustine Confessions*, Bk. 10.

3 Again, this is a paraphrase of Augustine's discussion in *Confessions* 6.9.

4 *Confessions* 10.27.

5 See particularly the discussion in Charry, pp. 137 ff.

6 *De Trinitate* 4.1.2.

7 *De Trinitate* 13.13.17-14.18.

8 *De Trinitate* 13.14.18-15.19.

9 *De Trinitate* 7.3.4. Charry summarizes: "[T]he self is formed by creation, deformed by sin, and reformed by Christ." Charry, 131.

10 Charry nicely summarizes Pelagius: "Change comes from changing, not from thinking about changing." Charry, 136.