

Presumption and Despair: A Sermon

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Hebrews 12:1-7, 11-14

Luke 12:49-56



I am going to talk about sin this morning. I am not talking about sin because this is my favorite sermon topic. I am talking about sin because this is the common subject of the lectionary readings. Sin is a difficult topic to preach on for at least two reasons. First, in today's popular culture, Christians are accused of being obsessed with sin, or, more specifically with other people's sins. Second, Christians are accused of being judgmental of other people's sins, and no one likes to be judged.

I do think that there is some truth to these accusations. There are preachers who love to talk about sin, but one gets the impression that too often they mean the sins of the people in their pews that they find most irritating. There are few things that turn people off from the church like a preacher who scolds parishioners from the pulpit, reminding them of just how far they are from living up the pastor's expectations.

At the same time, there is a certain amount of hypocrisy in all of this. The same culture that criticizes Christians for being obsessed with sin is absolutely unforgiving of behaviors that they don't call sin. They just call these behaviors by different names. Hatred, intolerance, and bigotry, are the

three main sins condemned in our culture today. And all you have to do to be guilty of one of these three offenses is to disagree with the current spirit of the age. Again, although no one likes to be judged by others, there is plenty of judgment to go around. The news media loves to tell the stories of the latest celebrity who has, once again, had to check into a rehabilitation program because of a drug or alcohol addiction. You cannot buy groceries without noticing the tabloid newspapers and magazines with the latest shocking headline about which Hollywood actor was caught having an affair, or, an even worse sin, which Hollywood actress has gained too much weight to wear a bikini at the beach. And, of course, there is the world of politics, which has become something of a contact sport in our society. One of the ironies of today is that we live in a culture where no one believes in sin, but everyone blames other people for things we do not call sin, and where no one believes in forgiveness for any of these things. If you're ever guilty of the kinds of things that one group or the other disapproves of in our culture, God help you, because only God can.

What all of these examples have in common is that they are about other people's sins. My friend and colleague Leander Harding has defined sin as "Things other people do that we don't approve of." At the same time, Leander says, we all do things that other people do not approve of, but we don't think those are sin. The religious writer Kathleen Norris has a better definition of sin: "To comprehend that something is wrong, and choose to do it anyway." (*Acedia and Me*)

There are some things that our society condemns that are not really sins. No longer having the body you had in high school when you go to the beach is not a sin. Not having as well-paying a job as the next guy, or not being able to afford the latest car or the newest iPhone is not a sin.

However, there are things that people do that really are wrong. Jesus defined the heart of the law as loving God and

loving our neighbor. The ten commandments can be summarized as a list of genuinely wrong actions that do not show love for God or neighbor. There really are times when people put themselves at the center of the universe, and put themselves where God should be. There are some things human beings can do that really do cause harm to other people. And, let's be honest, these are things that we all do. We are not taking the notion of sin seriously as long as we define sin as things that "other people do." Any serious talk about sin needs to begin the way that Alcoholics Anonymous users introduce themselves. "Hello, my name is Bill. And I am a sinner."

So the first thing we need to do when it comes to sin is to recognize that sin is something serious. Sin is when we try to run the world as if we are God rather than letting God do his job. Sin really hurts other people. And, second, we need to recognize that we all do it.

But the lectionary readings this week do not focus on just any sins, but a particular kind of sin. A key theme of the lectionary readings from the epistle to the Hebrews this week and last week is that of hope. Last week's reading began with the famous definition of faith: "Faith is the assurance of things hopes for, the evidence of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1) That theme of hope continues in this morning's reading. In the Middle Ages, spiritual writers talked about two temptations connected with sin that were opposite of one another, and yet had something in common in that they were both temptations to sin against hope. These were the temptation of presumption and the temptation of despair, and they seem to be the primary focus of the reading from Jeremiah and Hebrews this week.

What are presumption and despair?

Presumption is the temptation that says, "no matter what I do, no matter what sins I commit, I have nothing to worry about." Among other things, the anti-Christian philosopher Voltaire is

famous for having said, "Of course, God will forgive. That's his job." That is the attitude of presumption in a nutshell. Presumption seems to be the key problem addressed in the Jeremiah reading this morning: "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth? How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceits of their own hearts, who think to make my people forget my name by their dream that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?" (Jer. 23:23-26) Exactly what is it that these prophets have been prophesying? We find the answer earlier in the chapter, not included in the lectionary reading: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you . . . They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you,' and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.' " (vs. 16-17) Presumption is the sin of those who presume to speak for God without having heard God speak to them, and who have no concern that they might be mistaken. It is the view that says that God is on our side rather than making sure first that we're on God's side.

Presumption is perhaps the most characteristic sin of the secular culture we live in today where people seem to think that the whole notion of sin is something we can do without. But I think there is also a real case of presumption among those, both in the secular world and in the church who define sin not as what we do, but as what other people do. Presumption is the sin that says "I've got nothing to worry about, but that other guy is in trouble."

Despair is the opposite extreme from presumption. Despair is the temptation that says, "No matter what I do, no matter how much I try, God will never forgive me because I have done something so bad, it could never be forgiven." But despair can also be the sin that says that God has forgotten about me, or

God just does not care. Despair is the key temptation treated in the Hebrews passage. The entire book of Hebrews is addressed to those who are in danger of losing their faith because of persecution, and this morning's passage exhorts its hearers to not despair or give up: "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. . . . Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees . . . so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed." (Heb. 12:3, 12) Despair is, I think, the temptation to many of us who find ourselves living in a culture in which Christian faith is no longer appreciated, where the media almost always portray Christians in a negative light, where perhaps our own families think that we are misguided because we have faith.

Up to this point I have been setting up a problem. But there would be no point to the sermon without a prescription for the problem. The first part of the solution is to note something that would be easy to miss if we only read the lectionary readings this morning. Sometimes the lectionary can mislead because it does not include everything that is important. When we talk about sin, it is important to remember that the context of sin is always grace. One of the reasons that secular culture is suspicious of Christians is that it hears Christians talking about sin, but it does not hear the message of grace that provides the essential context for understanding sin. As a result, non-Christians tend to think that the Christian God has an anger-management problem. God is always angry, and he is always condemning people who think that they are just fine, and are only minding their own business.

In both of our lectionary readings this morning, however, the primary context of the warnings about sin is God's goodness, God's love, and God's care for his people. Jeremiah is usually thought of as a prophet of judgment, but in Jeremiah, that judgment has a context. Sin is forgetting that God loves

Israel. At the beginning of Jeremiah in chapter 2, God says to Israel: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness." (Jer. 2:2) God asks Israel "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?" God points out that he delivered Israel from slavery in the land of Egypt, "And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things." (vs.5, 7) But despite that, God says, Israel has forgotten the good things that God has done. God's message to the presumptuous is "You have forgotten something. You are who you are only because I have been gracious to you."

Similarly, in Hebrews, the context for the warnings in this morning's lectionary readings are everything that the writer has said already about what God has done in Christ. In the first verse of the book, the author writes, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . ." (Heb. 1:1) In today's lectionary passage, the context is the previous chapter, whose theme is hope. God's message to the despairing is "I have not forgotten about you."

There is also a solution to the problem of both presumption and despair, and it is faith. Or, rather, it is specifically faith in Jesus. In our Hebrews reading this morning, the author writes: "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God." (Heb. 12:1-2)

The author points to the cross, and the cross is the only solution to the twofold problem of presumption and despair. There were groups of both kinds of people present at Jesus' crucifixion. Those who put Jesus to death were certainly examples of the presumptuous. The Jewish religious leaders of

the time aligned themselves with the Romans – the Jews' worst enemies – to put Jesus to death. And they did it because they thought that they were doing what God wanted, and that Jesus was an enemy of God. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples provide a fine example of the temptation to despair. While Jesus was being put on trial for his life, Peter warmed his hands by a fire and denied that he knew him three times. The rest of the disciples fled.

And how does Jesus himself address these two groups? Of the presumptuous, those who crucified him, Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) Jesus' address to the despairing can be found in his appearance to Peter after his resurrection,. After he rose from the dead, Jesus appeared to his disciples who had fled him in his hour of greatest need, and the first thing, he says is "Do not be afraid!" (Matt. 28:10, Luke 24: 38, John 20:19) To Peter, who had denied him three times, he says "Feed my sheep!" (John 21:15) And he tells them all, "I will be with you always." (Matt. 28: 20)

There is a third option that is neither presumption nor despair, the option of faith. And that is what we find in the gospel of John where the apostle John and Jesus' mother stand at the cross. (John 19: 25-26) The presumptuous, those who were sure that God was on their side, nailed Jesus to the cross. And they stood by and mocked him. (Mark 15:29-32) The despairing, Jesus' disciples, fled from the cross out of fear. But a few, some of Jesus' women followers, and the apostle John, stood by the cross.

And it is the cross by which Jesus overcomes the presumptuous, and returns hope to the despairing. Why is the cross the one effective response to the temptations of presumption and despair? Because it is in the cross that the power of the omnipotent God is shown in the vulnerability of a love that embraces rather than destroys us in our presumption and despair. To the presumptuous, the cross presents them with a

God whose power is beyond any strength they can imagine, but who responds to his enemies not with vengeance, but with forgiveness. To the despairing the cross presents them with a God who does not threaten, but rather reaches out to us even to the point of dying for us. Paul writes, "God demonstrates his love for us, in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8)

And the cross has been the one thing that has overcome both the presumptuous and the despairing. There are numerous examples in history of the presumptuous, the proud who knew they were in the right, and that God was on their side, who have had their pride broken by the cross. Saul of Tarsus was a young Jewish leader who was convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a false prophet. He was on his way to the city of Damascus to arrest and imprison Christians, when the risen Christ appeared to him as spoke "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4) From that point on, Saul's life was radically changed, and he became the apostle Paul, who went on to write that the cross is the foolishness of God that is wiser than the wisdom of men. (1 Cor. 1:18-25) Martin Luther was a medieval monk, whose consciousness of his own sin accused him to the point he was convinced that God would never be gracious to him. But it was the cross that convinced Luther of God's graciousness, and Luther went on to become the great theologian of the cross.

I would imagine that there are many who hear these words who, at one time or another, have been tempted by presumption. There are times when we have been sure that we are just okay. We imagine that if God could see things from our point of view, he would congratulate us on just how right we are, and how great a job we are doing. Or perhaps, we have found ourselves at the opposite extreme. We look in the mirror and we see a failure, we see someone God could not possibly love, and perhaps we ask ourselves how God could forgive someone who has messed things up as badly as we have. And I would imagine, most of us have belonged to both groups, at one or another

time of our lives, sometimes presumptuous, sometimes despairing.

The wonderful thing is that God is not proud. God is the infinite Creator of the entire universe. To anyone who is convinced that they have got it all together, God could simply say "You don't know what you're talking about!" The entire universe could collapse around us, and where would we be? But instead, the infinite all powerful God has made himself very small. He has come among us in the person of Jesus, and he has allowed the presumptuous to nail him to a cross. To the despairing, to those who feel that God could never forgive, the Jesus who died on the cross has risen from the dead, and comes to us as he came to Peter, who had denied him three times. And whether we are presumptuous or despairing, we are called to be like John and Mary, and to return to the Jesus who was crucified for us, no longer trying to convince ourselves that we have it all together, because we don't, but also no longer worrying that we have made things so wrong that there is no hope for us. The crucified Jesus is our hope.

So let us not be too proud to admit that we are not in the right after all. We cannot fool God, and he knows what we are. But neither let us be the fearful who have no hope. Let us be like Mary and John and come to the cross where our presumption and despair are both swallowed up in the love of Jesus, who overcomes our strength with his weaknesses, and overcomes our fear with his love.