

Stuck in the Middle

June 29, 2008 | Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 8) Year A

Lectionary citations

Gen 22:1-14 with Ps 13 or

Rom 6:12-23

Matt 10:40-42

“But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”

Beloved, I am in mourning for a friend who died this past week. I met her in the dorms at Mizzou about 30 years ago. I last saw her when I went to visit her in Portland, OR about 10 years ago—my first visit trip to the West Coast. I had always hoped to visit her again, but had never gotten around to it, although we kept in touch by e-mails and phone calls. It was by phone that she said goodbye to me a week ago Saturday—all she could do was whisper. She and I were the kind of friends who did not stay in touch during good times. However, during bad times, we knew we could call and talk and get the support we needed. It was a good friendship, but I always felt a bit of regret that the press of other priorities and relationships meant we spent very little time together. This loss has reminded me how short this life is and how precious our time is. We are given a limited amount of time in this life to love and care for each other. We need to make the best of what we have. To accomplish much, we need a clear direction in our life, a focus, and a purpose.

Today’s Epistle makes an interesting claim—that our life has a direction whether we know it or accept it. St. Paul gives a stark choice—we can be slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness. For Paul, slavery was a fact of life—it was one of the most common economic relationships of his day. To be a slave meant to be owned by your master, to be considered property, and to be used as the master saw

fit. The only protection you had from abuse was your master's desire to preserve his valuable property and the master's moral beliefs about the treatment of slaves. All slaves were not treated the same—the life of a miner (brutal and short) was nothing like the life of a grammar tutor (long and comfortable). However, all slaves lacked what we see as fundamental freedoms, including those of choosing where to live and what work to do.

What a slave could choose was exactly how to do his job and how well to do it. Hard working and productive slaves with valued skills could earn extra income and even save up enough to buy their freedom. Others would choose to coast along, only doing enough work to avoid punishment. In some ways, being a slave was little different from being an employee. However, most employees have the right to leave work at the end of the day and spend what is left of the day as they please.

Paul was writing to an audience who understood slavery very well. Some of them were slaves and some were slave owners. He was writing to a church that understood justifying grace—we are saved by the gift of grace freely given to us through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Paul is saying that when we are saved, when we receive justifying grace, we are given a choice to continue as slaves of sin, or to become slaves of righteousness.

Paul denied that there was a third option: that salvation led to freedom from any kind of slavery. In Paul's day, as our own, this third option seemed the most attractive. If you are assured of salvation and not under the authority of the Old Testament Law, why not just do as you see fit. Paul's reply was that you are still living in the world, and everything in the world is under the authority of either evil or good. To Paul, we are all slaves of someone or something. Those who think they are free of any master, that not even God is their master, are really slaves of sin.

Paul argues that it is impossible to stand still in life. He says that our moral position is not stable. We are always making moral choices that declare which master we serve. Paul is also saying that those choices shape who we are. If we are slaves of righteousness, we will be sanctified, that is, be

led to holiness. If we are slaves of righteousness, we will do our best to obey the “pattern of teaching” that was given to us by Christ. Although we will not always make the right decisions, we will be guided by Christ’s commandments. If we are slaves of sin, we will limit the options we choose from, so that we are always making choice between “bad” and “worst.” If we are slaves of sin, we will become more and more sinful, be led to ever-increasing wickedness.

This is a sound argument, but my initial reaction was to say that it does not completely describe how the Christian life is really led. When I thought about this, the image of a traffic circle came to mind. It is an odd traffic circle, because there are only two roads leading out of it. One road goes downhill and is a broad and smooth highway that leads down into the desert. The other is a steep and narrow path, rocky and twisting, but it leads into a green highland country. We circle around that traffic circle. Some of us just keep circling, sizing up those two roads, but never turning into either of them. Others boldly turn into one of the roads, but after a few miles, start questioning their decision, make a quick u-turn, and go back to driving around and around the circle. Then there are always a few who make the turn into one of the roads and they never return. If we have our car radio on, we hear wonderful and terrifying reports about them, reports that may make us ready to follow them or that frighten us into more circling.

Being “stuck in the middle” means living a decent life according to the world’s standards. Being in the middle means being “lukewarm.” You sin, but your sins are just like everyone else’s. You do good deeds, but mainly for your family and people with whom you feel comfortable. Being stuck in the middle means being a good citizen, even if you are not a good neighbor. It means going to church and giving to the church, even if you do not pray for the sick, or visit the lonely, or feed the hungry. It means living well according to the world’s standards of behavior, even if you do not live up Christ’s commandments and commissions.

I think many Christian find themselves in this condition. They have accepted justifying grace—

they are saved, but they are not ready to become holy people. They are not becoming progressively more wicked—they will not turn into that broad highway, but they are also not ready to become holy—that steep and narrow path looks too difficult and challenging. This is Christianity in the comfort zone, lukewarm Christianity.

John of Patmos, speaking for Christ, said about a lukewarm church in Revelation 3, “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”

John is challenging us to consider whether we really can keep circling around for the rest of our lives. To stretch the analogy, if we keep circling, we will run out of gas. At that point, we can roll down that broad downhill highway, but there is no way we can make progress up that steep and narrow path to the green highlands of the Kingdom. Maybe we are refusing to see that the traffic circle is actually part of that broad downhill highway. If we are not on the upward path, we are already going the other way.

Paul seems to be saying that salvation is a process, not a one-time event. Even if we are saved by grace, if we remain slaves of sin, we will be driven toward greater and greater evil, and we will lose our salvation—the wages of sin is death. However, if we continue to accept the continuing presence of grace in our lives, we will be led to greater and greater holiness, and receive the gift of eternal life. This sanctifying grace makes the lives of Christian different from the lives of other people. This grace bears fruit in the gifts of the spirit and in Christian love. Ask yourself, “Do I see the fruits of the spirit in my

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life?”

Today’s Gospel challenges Christ’s disciples not to just greet and help those who are important—the prophets and righteous persons. It is good to honor prophets and care for righteous persons. However, the real test of sanctifying grace is whether we are called to help even the lowliest. Remember, “If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is known to be my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly be rewarded.” Amen.

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