

The Second Sunday in Lent: Year C, March 16-17, 2019: *A Call to Deny Sin and Turn to Jesus*
Readings: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Psalm 27:10-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

And now Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever pleasing to you, O' Lord, our Rock and Redeemer – amen.

You might not know by looking around in here, but today is St. Patrick's Day. In fact, I was tempted to put my green stole on, but I thought it might clash with all the purple. Joking aside, I suspect that none of you are surprised by the declaration that today is St. Patrick's Day given the popularity of the Feast even in our post-Christian, secular society. The ironic thing is that today is meant to honor a Saint known for spreading the Gospel and founding monastic communities; instead, it has become an excuse to indulge in drunkenness and debauchery – a.k.a., sin. This contrast is made all the more stark when we consider that St. Patrick's Day usually falls within the season of Lent, a season set aside for turning away from the world and our sin in order to seek the face of Jesus and his kingdom – what we call *repentance*.

In fact, I think there is an interesting intersection here today: On the one hand, traditionally, the Second Sunday of Lent has been focused on *calling people to deny sin and turn to Jesus*;¹ on the other hand, the Feast of St. Patrick is a day to honor and lift up as an example a Saint of the Church who devoted his life to *calling people to deny sin and turn to Jesus*. So to lay my cards on the table, so to speak, what I want to do today is to honor St. Patrick by sharing a little bit about his life and ministry with you before (briefly) unpacking our readings today. Then I hope to close by offering a few suggestions gleaned from the intersection of our readings and the celebration of St. Patrick. And I want to do it all in under 20 minutes – somebody pray for us!

¹ For anyone interested in the liturgical calendar and its place in Anglican spirituality, Robert Webber's book, *Ancient-Future Time*, is a wonderful place to start. Webber himself was raised in a non-liturgical tradition and came to be an Anglican, in part, because of the calendar and the richness of the way of life shaped by it. I highly recommend Webber and his work to you. He is an accessible writer who wrote for the Christian in the pew (and used lots of personal stories) – though he does have a few headier, academic books. Stick to his Ancient-Future series and you will do well.

I imagine that most, if not all of you are aware that St. Patrick is considered to be the "Patron Saint" or the Apostle to Ireland. But did you know that he wasn't born there? He was actually born in England sometime around A.D. 390. Tragically, Patrick was a victim of human trafficking when he was stolen from his home at the age of 16 and sold into slavery as a shepherd in Ireland. We know from his autobiography that, despite being raised in a Christian home, his faith didn't mean much to him; that is, until he was forced into slavery and began crying out to the Lord for his deliverance. After six years, God heard Patrick and he was able to escape and make his way home; however, he was forced to go the long way home through France where we think he may have come into contact with the budding monastic movement.

Upon arriving home in Britain, Patrick began being trained as a priest. It was during this time that he had what we might consider a prophetic dream. In the dream he saw all the babies of Ireland coming to him, pleading with him to return to Ireland so that they could hear the good news of the Gospel. He was being called to evangelize the very people that had enslaved him! Talk about loving your enemies. After being consecrated a Bishop and receiving papal approval, St. Patrick returned to Ireland where he called the local pagans to turn from their idols and sin in order to turn toward Christ Jesus.

Two interesting aspects of St. Patrick's thirty-year ministry warrant our attention: One, he had a great deal of success – hence our celebrating his Feast today. But of particular interest to us Anglicans is that his success in Ireland led to the renewal and further spread of Christianity into England, whence our tradition comes. Indeed, the Celtic spirituality that St. Patrick helped to develop has arguably had a lasting impact on our own Anglican spirituality.

This leads to number two: Initially, St. Patrick had a hard time, in part because he had trouble keeping what converts he could win; inevitably, they would return to their former pagan

ways of sin. Old habits die hard, especially when they are reinforced by the habits of friends, family, and culture. St. Patrick recognized that as long as the new Christians remained in communities of practice that were aimed at the pagan gods and culture, the new converts would continue to return to the old ways. What was needed, then, were new communities of practice aimed at the Triune God and *his* culture/Kingdom.

Because the pagan roots went deep there, the "normal" way of doing church wasn't working in Ireland. The normal model was too thin, too shallow. In order to have their hearts re-tuned toward Jesus and away from their pagan roots, the new converts needed a deeper, more robust community of practice. So St. Patrick began planting monastic communities that were devoted to living together under a rule of life, which would include fasting, liturgical worship and prayer, study, and work, as well as other disciplines. Lest we think that this was some sort of passive withdrawal from society, however, the motivation was the spiritual progress and growth of the new converts *so that* they could reach their fellow countrymen – in other words, *it was missional*. And it worked! Ireland was converted and began spilling their faith over their own borders into England and the European continent.

Notice the problem for St. Patrick wasn't necessarily winning converts to Christ; it was keeping them won to Christ. Too often they were being won back by the world. Why was this happening? Well, in a word, *sin*. Now the temptation here is for us to disassociate ourselves from the story and to think of *those pagans*. "Of course *those pagans* have a problem with sin. They're pagans." But that misses an important element of the story: Sin remained a problem for the *Christians*; it was *Christians* that were falling away because of sin; it was the *Christians* that needed the new communities of practice in order to sustain their faith/loves in the pagan culture. That's not *them*, it's *us*! We're the problem. It's our sin that is the real threat to us!

Indeed, our readings today bare this warning out, if we consider them as a whole and read them together. First, consider our OT passage.² In our Genesis reading we encounter the story of God making a covenant with Abraham. There is a lot that we could glean from this reading (perhaps 3 or more sermons worth), but what I want us to notice today is that this is the moment that the covenant community of God is formed. It is here that God binds himself to a particular community of people thus giving them identity, meaning, and purpose. *These* are God's people, and with that comes moral and liturgical obligations – think of the Ten Commandments, which Jesus sums up as "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." It is this covenant that is the basis for the New Covenant of which those of us in Jesus Christ are a part. In Christ, we gentiles have been grafted into the community of God inaugurated here in Genesis 15. The lectionary, then, is alerting us to our place in this narrative; these readings are for us precisely *as* the covenant people of God.

In light of this observation, let us consider our epistle reading from Philippians.³ As the introduction rightly notes, St. Paul is warning us against, so called, "false Christians;" that is, men and women within the community of God, the Church, who are ruled by their "appetites," and are therefore bound to this world.⁴ To put it another way, these people love and worship the things of this world. Their habits are patterned by the surrounding culture, rather than by their identity in Christ and membership in the covenant people of God. Instead of loving and

² Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

³ Philippians 3:17-4:1

⁴ During what is known as the Donatist Controversy, St. Augustine famously argued that, until the final judgment, there would remain within the Church both sinners and saints, or in his own words (which he borrowed from Jesus, cf., Matthew 13:24-30), wheat and tares. In this light, we might put the "false Christians" St. Paul has in view here in the "tares" basket. They may remain in the midst of the Church on this side of Christ's judgment, but they will be separated from the wheat in the end, assuming that they remain unrepentant.

worshipping the Triune God, they worship idols – maybe money, or power, or their kids' sports teams, or the Bills (which seems the most pitiable of all), or their favorite celebrity, I could go on. And instead of loving their neighbors, they exploit and manipulate and oppress them – or perhaps just as bad, they ignore them and make no attempt to reach them with the hospitality of Jesus Christ.

Here's the thing, if we think that this warning is really about "false Christians" we miss St. Paul's point all together. First of all, we are all sinners and risk being false Christians. Don't believe me, read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, what we also refer to as the Beatitudes. Take one quick example from the Apostle Matthew's account in chapter 5 of his Gospel (p. 961 of your pew Bibles). In verses 21-22 Jesus says: "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing' shall be guilty before the supreme court." Show of hands, anybody here ever been angry at somebody? Now I admit that this is an over simplistic, even ham-fisted, reading of the text, but I only have so much time and I want us to get the point: The point being all of us are driven by our hearts, what St. Paul calls our appetites – we are loving creatures. But in our fallen state, all of our hearts are disordered and as Jesus warns, they are capable of great sin – the move from anger to murder is not as far as we like to believe.

And this points to St. Paul's real concern in our Philippians passage: his warning about, so called, "false Christians" isn't really about them, *it's about you. It's your heart he's worried about.* St. Paul knows what the human heart is capable of; his culture thought him to be a righteous man, and yet he tells us that he was the supreme sinner. He knows the inner battle that rages in all of us, how our hearts are constantly being pulled toward the world and the desires of

the flesh away from the God in Jesus Christ to whom we belong. Sin is a real threat. *Your sin is a real threat.* And we must take it seriously. In fact, we might hear in St. Paul's words an echo from Proverbs 4:23: "Watch over your heart with all diligence because from it flow the springs of life." It is true, the "false Christians" pose a threat, but only because your heart and my heart are fallen and prone to sin, so we must diligently guard them from false loves.

And the reason this matters is because Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead as our Gospel passage alludes to. Now you may comfort yourself by saying that you are a Christian, but are you? Or are you a false Christian? Do you serve your own appetites and the loves/desires of the flesh, or do you serve the One True God revealed in Jesus Christ? These are the hard questions we are invited to ask ourselves this week. Jesus has hard words for the covenant people in our Gospel today: they have killed and stoned those sent to them, and worse, they have rejected Jesus. Jesus is already standing in judgment over the covenant people of his own time, even as he foretells his own return, which we know will be to judge ultimately. *We cannot miss that Jesus is judging his people here;* if we do, we will miss that we too will be judged. *Someday all of us will stand before Jesus sitting on his throne.* Will he find you to be a faithful and loving bride, or will he find you to be an adulteress?

Now in closing, let me say that while we are pressed with hard questions this week, Lent is an invitation do something about our answers. We are invited to take an active part in our spiritual growth and the growth of our families. This was St. Patrick's concern for his Irish converts. He recognized that their hearts were being pulled away from their true love and he needed to implement strategies to protect their hearts. So he developed his monastic communities. Saints, we all need to live in community that is shaped and aimed at love for Jesus. It's why Jesus called and traveled with the twelve; it's why he sent his disciples out in pairs; and

it's why *belong* is our first core-value. We simply cannot learn to love on our own; that only leads to self-love. Love that is aimed at the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and at our neighbor can only be learned and shaped in a community. This must be a priority for all of us, clergy included, especially in a culture that is increasingly bent away from the things and love of God, just as the one that St. Patrick ministered in was. Showing up to church once a week is simply not enough to combat the ways that our hearts are pulled away from God the rest of the week. We need more; we need intentional life-on-life kinds of community. We have more than a dozen groups of different sorts already active in this church, and we are actively working to start more. Join one. You can find a list on our website. If you don't see what you're looking for, come talk to me. I want to hear your idea.

St. Patrick also realized that our hearts need to be intentionally retrained to love what we were created to love, namely, the Triune God. First, we are born with a sinful nature, which means that our hearts are from the first bent inward and away from God. On top of that, though, this world and its institutions work to train our hearts to love almost anything but God. And as we have rehearsed above, this doesn't just stop once we are in Christ. True, we are made regenerate through Baptism and given power to resist by the Holy Spirit, but the battle wages on until we are brought into glory. This is why St. Patrick instituted a rule of life for his monasteries that was centered on discipline, especially fasting. Intentionally saying "no" to certain joys or pleasures of this world for a time by fasting, trains our hearts to say "no" to sin. It helps us gain control of our loves and redirect them toward Jesus Christ. This is why we fast in Lent. Not as just another empty ritual, but because Lent calls us to take our sin seriously and to realize that eternity is at stake, not just for ourselves, but for the world too – our friends, family, and neighbors. Fasting provides us an opportunity to partner with the Holy Spirit in training our

hearts to Love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all of our minds, and with all of our strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

To the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – *amen*.