

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to July 6

Proper 9

Year A

RCL



Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalms 145: 8 - 15

Romans 7:15-25a

The Collect

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant
with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.
Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Psalm 145:8-15 Page 802, BCP

Exaltabo te, Deus

- 8 The LORD is gracious and full of compassion,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
- 9 The LORD is loving to everyone
and his compassion is over all his works.
- 10 All your works praise you, O LORD,
and your faithful servants bless you.
- 11 They make known the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your power;
- 12 That the peoples may know of your power
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
- 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom;
your dominion endures throughout all ages.
- 14 The LORD is faithful in all his words
and merciful in all his deeds.
- 15 The LORD upholds all those who fall;
he lifts up those who are bowed down.

Romans 7:15-25a

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this

body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ
our Lord!

SERMON

This is the Fourth of July Sunday, the day we celebrate the founding of this vast experiment of a country founded upon the ideals of individual rights. You would think that this is the one Sunday of the year when I would wave the flag! Sure wish I could do that, but this Sunday, I think we need to have a conversation with Paul about confession.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

At first blush, that sounds odd coming from Saint Paul, the church's first foot-soldier, but the more I think on it, the more convicted I become. Who gets up in the

morning with an evil laugh, rubs his hands together and cackles that he is going to do great evil this day? Nobody sets out to do evil. Rather, we convince ourselves that whatever we do represents good, but it is undeniable that we do evil. Evidence is all around us in dead children in the middle east and starving children here. How can our actions deviate so far from our intentions? Glad you asked. Here's how. The writer of Proverbs tells us:

All a person's ways seem
pure to them,
but motives are weighed
by the Lord.¹

Evil is produced when we pursue our ideas of good with so much conviction of our own righteousness so that we never even see the evil we have produced. Paul is confessing that he sees within himself the power of

¹ Proverbs 16:2 NIV

sin which can turn even the best intentions from good to evil. This is the rough spot in being a Christian. You must, to be a Christian of integrity, confess that you are powerless to do what you want but very often do the thing you hate. One of the qualities that made Paul the giant of the faith that he was was his willingness to face up to his personal weakness. It is only by confessing your sin, just as Paul has done, that you are in a position to ask God for His grace to continue and without God's grace, you will fail.

If I do nothing else today, I want to convince you of that fact – without God's grace, you will fail. You, like Paul, can will what is right, but you cannot do it, and that goes equally for you as a person and for our country. Absent God's grace you will fail, and the only approach to God's grace is through confession that you can't manage it by yourself and that you are dependent

upon God.

Preaching in large, well-attended churches, particularly those on TV, seems to me often to bring a message something like “God loves you just the way you are, for your proclamation of faith has made you the good guys. Go change other people. They are the problem.” Without deliberate confession of our weakness and utter dependence on God, our ability to convince ourselves that we are doing good, even when we do much evil, leads us to live in a sort of bubble of affirmation in which our intentions are valued more than the results of our actions. C.S. Lewis, perhaps the most articulate Christian writer since Paul, warns us in this wise:

The most dangerous thing you can do is to take any one impulse of your own nature and set it up as the thing you ought to follow at all costs. There is not one of them which will not make us into devils if we set it up as an

absolute guide.²

I'm going to discomfort the comfortable later, but it's sometimes easier to see our own faults reflected in someone else's actions. I want to look at the situation in Iraq and Syria. ISIS, the acronym for the revolutionaries who now claim a large portion of Iraq and Syria as "The Islamic State" are Sunnis. Sunni Islam is the world's second largest religious body, after Christianity³, representing some 90% of Muslims. The remaining Muslims are mostly Shia. To understand the split, we have to go back some 600 years after Jesus' time, to the year 632 CE. Muhammad, who both Sunni and Shia reverence as the prophet of God, had named his son-in-law Ali as his successor. Nonetheless, while Muhammad's family prepared his funeral, others elected Abu

² Mere Christianity (C. S. Lewis)

³ Connie R. Green, Sandra Brenneman Oldendorf, *Religious Diversity and Children's Literature: Strategies and Resources*, Information Age Publishing, 2011, p. 156. cf. also Gale Encyclopedia of the Mideast & N. Africa. "The largest branch in Islam, sometimes referred to as "orthodox Islam"; its full name is ahl al-Sunna wa aljama'a (the people of Sunna and consensus[?]), and it represents about 90 percent of the world Muslim population."

Bakr as caliph. Ali's family went along with this for the sake of unity, but in 657 C.E., after the murder of the third caliph, Ali was invited to become the fourth caliph, and that's when the trouble really started. It did not go well. Wars were fought against him over the issue of succession and he was assassinated in 661 CE. The party of Ali are what we know as Shia. The others, Sunni. Since 657 CE, much blood has been spilled over the question of who was the rightful successor to Mohammad.

It's not necessary to delve deeper into the issues which divide Sunnis and Shia today. It's enough to note that they have to do with this ancient succession and with interpretation of the holy books. In other words, both sides of this dispute will tell you that they are fighting to preserve the pure faith, represented by their understanding of Scriptural interpretation. So the good

they intend is to protect the pure faith. Paul mourned, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand”. Islam’s history demonstrates the truth of Paul’s confession.

I promised to discomfort the comfortable as well, and here goes. In 1095, about 400 years later, Pope Urban II, implored by the eastern Roman emperor to help defend Christianity in the East, called for the First Crusade from Western Europe. Over the next 200 years or so, Christian soldiers killed untold numbers of people in order to defend the religion of the one who taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Of course, what the Sunnis and the Shia and the Crusaders were actually doing was defending their image of God and their worship forms. God, the creator of the universe, does not need your protection or theirs. That which started out with a good intention — to carry the story forward — became,

in the end, intensely evil.

The notion that we are called to kill people in the defense of the Prince of Peace is called “the myth of redemptive violence”. Every cowboy movie you watched at the Capitol Theater, every game of cops and robbers you played drove this spike of sin deeper in your brain where it whispers to you even now that you are The Righteous One called to redeem the world from evil by violence.

And so, when the leadership of Afghanistan does horrible things to its people and demonstrates flagrant evil, of course it is the duty of The Righteous One to ride in with weapons of such lethality as the world has never before seen and kill the people right left and center who stand in our way. How different our recent history might have been if our leaders had confessed with Paul

I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

“When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.” Had our leaders confessed that with Paul, would they have been so quick to believe in the presence of weapons of mass destruction? Would they have been so quick to consign so many to early graves? In an earlier time, would we have been so quick to agree that bombing villages in Viet Nam was an appropriate way to “save Viet Nam from Communism”?

Our fealty to high explosives and redemption through violence is so thoroughly a part of our souls that we no longer can even confess to them. Do you imagine that Satan goes about convincing you to do evil stuff you

wouldn't otherwise choose to do? You are mistaken. Satan goes about whispering in your ear that the evil you do is good, or justified by the other person's sin, or necessary, or done in self defense.

We see the suffering of the people in Syria and Iraq and it speaks directly to our hearts. Our solidarity with humanity, our compassion for God's children demands that we respond to the suffering of others. That's the good impulse that begins a process that has always ended in death and hatred. We feel we must do something and drawing on our most beloved myth, the myth of redemptive violence, we pursue that good impulse in the wrong way, adding to the suffering of those on the ground we have bombed, and turning ourselves into a devil to the very people we sought to help. The Guardian reports:

The US has demanded the resignation of

Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki as a condition for US military intervention...

That should fix the problem, all right. Just think of how smoothly things would have gone if Canada had just said to the US, “We demand the resignation of President Bush as a condition for Canadian military intervention in Michigan.” There is no way the American public would accept such an ultimatum from Canada and no way the people of Iraq could be expected to invite American air strikes in their country or entertain demands that their leader resign. Because we have lost the ability to see our sin, we have lost the ability to confess. We are so comfortable in our self-assigned role of The Righteous One that we no longer can acknowledge that, “All a person’s ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord.” We have drunk Satan’s Self-Righteous Stew to the dregs and smacked our lips

for more. The Nazarene church had this on its sign this week:

There Is No Right Way To Do The Wrong Thing

I would add:

There Are Many Ways To Do The Right Thing In The Wrong Way

If our country's impulse to help is allowed to deviate from good intention into death and hatred, then we, as Christians, are called upon to do just as Jesus did and to speak out. Remember that Jesus did not get nailed to a cross because he wandered around saying, "Peace and love, brother". He got nailed to a cross because he dared expose Satan's Self-Righteous Stew for what it was – poison. Our job is no less. Our job is to recall our intention to our divine task as set out in the teachings of Jesus and away from further death and hatred. It is our certainty in our own righteousness which blinds us to

our own sins and leads us away from confession and this is the sin we must first confess. This week, before we act, let us pray in this way:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God
Have mercy on me, a sinner.

Let us confess this week our vulnerability to sin, not just our peccadilloes that result from our vulnerability. Let us this week throw ourselves upon the floor before the Throne of Grace and confess that we have no power apart from God, that we are dependent upon him.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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