

Sunday June 10

Sermon - Jesse Barkalow

O Heavenly Father, you understand all your children; through your gift of faith we bring our perplexities to the light of your wisdom, and receive the blessed encouragement of your sympathy, and a clearer knowledge of your will. Glory be to thee for all your gracious gifts.

Amen

When our rector, the honorable Canon Don Armstrong asked me to preach this Sunday, I felt both honored and terrified. When I discovered that the text for this Sunday included the fall and the ‘unforgivable sin’ I was about ready to resign. Then I remembered that we Anglicans are under authority, and the responsibility for what I say falls on Father Armstrong.

I am also comforted by the knowledge that, even where my homily falls short, the truth of Christ is always proclaimed in the liturgy.

My wife, Christine, and I were drawn to the Anglican church in large part because of the liturgy. We both grew up in Christian homes and we had both experienced the falling apart of churches and communities built on a single person –a cult of personality. We were introduced to liturgy at New Life Down Town, but it did not take us long to decide that we wanted a church that didn’t just *use* liturgy, but a church that was *liturgical*. It was here at St. George’s that we discovered,

not just good teaching or community, but the communion of the Saints, which spans culture, space, and time.

As an undergraduate at CU Boulder, I studied Classics: the languages, literature, and history of the ancient Greeks and Romans. I had been working as a house painter and reading books on my own for about two years before I finally realized that if I wanted to emulate my favorite authors such as Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald, and Kierkegaard, and if I wanted to access the great works of literature and thought that inspired and informed *them*, I needed to be initiated into the communion of Classics. We never start out appreciating Vergil, Dante, and Milton, we learn to appreciate them when we put work into it. For me, the work looked like four years of studying Latin and history and of reading and writing, followed by four years of teaching Latin to middle and high schoolers.

Christine and I realized that, when it comes to the worship of God, we wanted to be initiated into the communion of the saints, the right and proper worship. We had both been walking with God since we were children, both been baptized, both been looking, as Paul says, 'not for things seen, but things unseen.' What we found in the Anglican church, here at St. George's, is a liturgy, passed down from generation to generation, firm in the apostolic faith, beautiful in its literary form, and right and proper in its worship of God. Like the study of Classics, the Anglican liturgy invited us into something greater than our own experience, something that requires time, work, and humility to be accessed.

A few years after joining St. George's, I felt the call to seminary and have just completed my first year at Princeton Theological Seminary. My goal in graduate school is to pursue a PhD in theology and to teach. However, since starting, I have experienced just how integral the church is to Christian education.

Christine and I have experienced the life of Jesus manifested in people and education, when God's word, the light of the gospel of Christ, is given in truth.

But we have also listened while the modern-day scribes (professors and theologians) call good bad, bad good, and Christ the prince of demons. We have also seen those who call themselves the brothers and sisters of Christ, but stand outside and refuse to do the will of God.

The experiences of the past year, the example of several professors, and the moving of the Holy Spirit, have all inspired me to pursue ordination, as well as a degree, and to serve in both the academy and the church.

I am very honored to be serving here at St. George's this summer, in our home congregation, where my wife and I were confirmed, and where our daughter Verona was baptized.

I would like to briefly illustrate what I believe to be Christ's meaning when he spoke those mysterious words,

“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

What is this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that never has forgiveness?

Part of me would like to say that it is breaking a lease agreement and cheating a poor student out of three months of rent.

But that is definitely not true.

This week, as I was attempting to prepare my first ever sermon, I received a text from my neighbor back in Princeton, which became a massive distraction to my mind and spirit. My wife and I had sublet our apartment to another student for the summer, an honest and upright young man who wanted his own place for the summer term while he studied Latin. I found out from my neighbor that another student was moving in without my knowledge or consent. The communication between the young man and me, as you can imagine, quickly deteriorated and I am still waiting to hear back from him and to see any money.

Dealing with this made it very difficult to concentrate on my sermon, so I did what countless other preachers have done, I decided to work it into the sermon. In fact, I think it works quite well, because I would **like** to stand up here and tell you that **he** is in fact the guilty one, and that

he had best look to the eternal security of his soul; but this is not the case because all of his sins are forgiven him. **I** am the one who needs to look to the security of my soul.

Why?

The answer is simple, we pray it in church every Sunday, my wife and I pray it in the evening before we put Verona down for bed, Christians have been praying it ever since Christ himself spoke the immortal words,

'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

As the old Scotsman and Preacher, George MacDonald said, the unforgivable sin is the spiritual state that *'will allow no forgiveness to come into the soul.'*

There is a spiritual condition that does not allow for forgiveness. **All can be forgiven**, but our own heart-posture can prevent forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive our neighbor, we prevent God's forgiveness from reaching us.

Just a few chapters after our Gospel reading in Mark, Jesus says *'And whenever you stand praying, **forgive**, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.'* (Mark 11:25)

We refuse the LORD, when we are in the spiritual condition of being unforgiving. To shut out the neighbor from *our* mercy and love is to shut out mercy and love from our hearts. If I hold this

young man in the hell of my unforgiveness, I hold hell in my own heart. There is little room for the Holy Spirit, in an unforgiving heart, and eventually one must yield to the other. Either the hell must be purged or the Spirit will be completely rejected.

MacDonald says, "*With our forgiveness to our neighbor, in flows the consciousness of God's forgiveness to us...with the effort, we become **capable** of believing that God can forgive us.*"

I am sure that everyone in this room has a story to tell about betrayal that makes my story of a broken rental agreement look like mere childishness. We all know what a disease the refusal to forgive is in our own hearts. It eats away at our minds, our bodies, and our spirits. It poisons the cup of fellowship, it is an unclean yeast that spoils the whole batch of bread.

It makes sermon writing very difficult!

When Adam and Eve sin, and invite hell into their hearts, they hide themselves from God, trying to avoid communion with the LORD.

But they do not remain hidden. God calls out to the man and Adam confesses his sin.

The Psalm 130 captures the spirit of hope for forgiveness,

'with the LORD there is steadfast love,

And with him is plenteous redemption.

And he will redeem Israel

From all his iniquities.'

What does this promise of redemption look like?

The serpent promises Eve that she will not die if she eats of the fruit. The satanic lie that we all live under. 'Our sins and our unforgiveness cannot hurt us.' But sin does bring death and an unforgiving heart partners with death to its own destruction.

but God reverses the satanic lie and brings life out of death. The pain of child birth is the source of new life, and the sweet and toil of labor is the source of our daily bread. We all return to the ground from which we came, we are dust, and to dust we return.

But we do not lose heart. As Paul says, our outer nature is wasting away under the weight of affliction, but he who raised to the Lord Jesus will raise us also, and our momentary afflictions, even the worst of the trespasses committed against us, when we forgive, are preparing us for an *'eternal weight of glory.'*

Amen