

14 March 2021, The Fourth Sunday of Lent: John 3:14-21

For God so loved the world...

So, begins perhaps the most well-known Bible verse. We even see references to John 3:16 on bumper stickers, t-shirts, and large signs in the endzone crowd at football games. Of course, the problem with familiarity is casual half-awareness. This question helps us focus: What do we “do” with sin and why?

One marvel I have noticed, being an armchair student of Church history, is that often an important theologian, spiritual leader, or movement emerges in the context of social and ecclesiastical chaos. Take 14th Century England: over the course of 100 years, there were three outbreaks of the Black Death (killing somewhere between 1/3 and 1/2 the population; there was a decades-long war with France, rival Popes (once point, three Popes excommunicated each other); there were less spectacular, more widespread Church scandals, civil wars, political unrest, and the crushing effects of full-blown Feudalism. In this mad anarchy there emerged a great English theologian, an unlikely candidate in every way. Being a woman disqualified her in the popular imagination. She wrote in English, a vulgar language: scholars wrote in Latin, the nobility spoke French. She was an anchoress: that is, a female hermit who lived in a room built on to her local parish. She is known as Julian of Norwich, which may not have been her real name. She left behind a book she called, *A Revelation of Love*, which was until the early 20th Century mostly unknown, except in a few monasteries and convents.

Julian was completely orthodox, intensely loyal to historic Christian Faith, while at the same time expressing her experience of God in unexpected, astounding ways. For instance, Julian describes sin as ‘behoovely;’ obviously a word not much in our vocabulary. Strictly speaking ‘behoovely’ means ‘incumbent upon, necessary.’ At first blush, that sounds shocking, doesn’t it? Yet it is not. At Romans 5:20, Paul writes: *...where sin increased, grace abounded all the more...just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise through justification. Should we continue to sin so grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?*

Traditional theology for centuries referred to sin as a ‘felix culpa;’ Latin meaning, a happy fault. For Jesus, Paul, Julian—the traditional Christian perspective—sin is abhorrent, but not an occasion for embarrassment, mere regret, or prideful self-justification; our sins are the opportunity for healing. In recognizing and being repulsed by our sins, we finally know what to offer God. This is the ‘what to do with sin.’

From today’s Gospel: *...the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*

Our choice is light or darkness; truth or falsehood; self-worship or serving God. What holds us back is our attachment to the old patterns of living. We love our sins more than we desire to be changed by God. We can come to the point of functional insanity: we keep doing the same things repeatedly, hoping for a different result. Yet even here there is hope. Our repugnance with our pointless, futile lives is itself God at work in us.

St. Augustine wrote: *This is how you begin to do the truth. You come to the light so that your works may be shown to originate in God. And you have come to the light because this very sin in you, which displeases you, would not displease you if God did not shine on you and his truth show it to you. But the one who loves his sin, even after being admonished, hates the light admonishing him and flees from it so that his work (sin) that he loves may not be proved to be evil....*

By offering our sins to God, sin itself becomes ‘behoovely’—the raw material for salvation and conversion. In this way, sin no longer weighs us down but is overshadowed by grace.

Why? Conversion is God at work in us; by letting go of our sins and releasing them to God we open the way for God to work on us, in us, through us. Giving our sins to God is making real our desire to be ‘birthed’ in God every day. Our aim is to please God, honor God, reveal God through the forgiveness of our sins. That so well-known verse that begins, *for God so loved the world...* is no longer just a slogan or even a theological statement but a way of living. Our sins are nothing; God’s merciful loving-kindness is everything.

I conclude with another brief excerpt from Julian of Norwich: God wishes to be known, and He delights that we remain in Him, because all that is less than He is not enough for us.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be Yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.