

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 18, 2009  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm sure I've told you over the years that when I went to college, I was a philosophy major. This decision struck my parents as odd, as I was always interested in the sciences and in mathematics. Why would a child who excelled in those areas, chose philosophy as his college major?

Good question. And then, as if that wasn't enough of a mystery, halfway through my college career, I added a religion major to my academic portfolio because I had exhausted most of the philosophy curriculum and wound up taking so many religion department courses that I thought I might as well add it to my major concentration. My parents were still wondering what I was doing. I then went off to study German literature in Vienna and had enough German credits to my name to add German as a declared minor. After paying three years of tuition and room and board, my mom asked what I would do with a degree in religion, philosophy and German. I didn't understand then what I understand now, as I also wondered what our first born would do with a degree in Policy Analysis or our last born with a degree in Geophysics?

The answer to that question then and my question now remains the same, "What do you do?" You go to graduate school, what else?

I see many of you nodding your heads, either because you have lived or are living the same scenario with your children, or else you perpetrated the same crime on your parents.

I did eventually get a job that had something to do with what I studied, but not before 9 years of lifeguarding, giving swim lessons, running water aerobics for overweight middle-aged women, cleaning filter equipment and the bathrooms after the club closed, and one day in a lamp factory, sorting chain, nuts and bolts, and cutting wire for the canopy where chandeliers meet the ceiling.

There were many days out in the hot sun when I questioned how valuable or essential Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher were to my well being and my potential future career as scholar or professor.

Thinking back on it all now, not all of those lengthy and convoluted conversations on ethics and morals and the nature of evil were wasted...Deb and I did raise two children, and the skills I learned in ethical debate came in handy when dealing with Katie.

And, truth be told, a good bit of the dialogues from the ancients, and the proofs of the existence of God and the nature of man and good and evil, have proved helpful over the years and I'm thankful to my teachers and professors for what they gave to me and to my mom for her patience and understanding. If there is one thing I could say to those who are about to go to college or graduate school, I would advise you somewhere along the way, to take a course in household plumbing or electrical wiring, because I have found those skills to be just as useful as a semester spent on Nicomachean ethics, perhaps even more from time to time.

A word to the wise should be sufficient.

Thinking back on those college days in philosophy class, one of the recurring themes in many of the great thinkers, was the business about humanity's basic goodness and inherent penchant for being not so good – to put it simply. The debate still rages, are we intrinsically good or inherently evil? Is that goodness or that propensity for evil in our DNA? Take an innocent child, and watch what happens to it as it grows and as it is subjected to the rest of us. Or take that innocent child, shield it from the influence of the rest of us, and see if by the time it reaches three, if it still says, "Mine."

The conversations of the great thinkers were more sophisticated than that, but the point remains the same. Is our propensity for getting into trouble genetic or environmental? Is our inclination to sin learned or inherited?

The other recurring question of theme among history's great thinkers has to do with the question of whether humanity is improving or not? If our basic nature is somehow flawed, and that is how we explain away the things we continually do wrong or mess up, do we do what we do because we don't know better? If you watch enough TV law shows, sooner or later you'll hear about the defense for the accused under-aged child offender, that he or she can't be indicted for a crime because he or she isn't old enough to know the difference between right or wrong, or not old enough to know that the crime he or she committed was wrong.

Applying this rationale to the whole of humanity, is our proclivity for sin a matter of inadequate knowledge? In other words, if we knew better, or better, if we knew more,

would we be different people, would we be better people, would we be kinder, or gentler, or more honest, or more caring, or more civil, or more loving?

And finally, to round out the philosophical debate, is the age old question of, are we getting better? As humanity becomes older and wiser and more well educated, as the world shrinks, as we come to know our global neighbors, as we amass knowledge, as we grow from our mistakes, as a species, are we getting better and better, so that eventually, we will become what God would have us be? Now I threw in the last part about God, because the great thinkers of history almost all agreed that when you throw God into the equation, things get murky.

Which is the primary reason why I left philosophy and started my religious studies, because philosophy without God didn't make much sense, because at some point in time, you come to the conclusion that without God, humanity doesn't make much sense, least of all the way we work, the things we think, the way we behave, the things we do to each other, the heartache we endure, the suffering we experience and finally, the death that befalls us all.

Without God, without that tie to that which is eternal and eternally good and eternally forgiving, I could never find much hope for us, for myself.

Let me give you one short example to suffice for today. Study the history of salvation, by that I mean, take a short look at the whole of God's dealings with God's people. What do you find? Well, it's not a pretty sight. From the moment of defiance in the Garden of Eden to yesterday's car bombings in Afghanistan., we're not getting better, we're certainly not getting smarter. If anything, we're just becoming more calloused. And as the world gets smaller, we just get better at insulating ourselves from what we know is out there and from what is out there happening to the rest of us.

In today's gospel reading, we hear about James and John, in Aramaic, boangeres, the Sons of Thunder, the two sons of Zebedee who became disciples of Jesus. By this time in the three year long period of time the disciples were with Jesus before his death, or according to some scholars, it was only one year, whatever the time period, it was certainly long enough for them to tune into his message, to appropriate the sense of what he was trying to preach. He talked about love, about mercy, about service, about sacrifice. He told stories and gave them examples in his parables about the new order he was trying to inaugurate, at least among his followers, where all were equal, where putting others first was the new paradigm, he talked about the law and how it was meant to serve God and not the other way around, he gathered outcasts and

sinner into innermost circle, he abandoned wealth and status and asked others to do the same, he said if you had two coats you ought to give one away, he said the kingdom of God was the priceless pearl of great worth that demanded allegiance and obedience, and that if gold and silver and power and prestige or even family asked you to put them first, you had to choose.

He came to teach by example, caring more for the person than for the position, he came to heal, caring more for the life than for the fame, or money. To woo the learned he spoke Greek and Hebrew, to woo the religious he quoted Scripture with a familiarity before unknown. To woo the outcast he scorned the status quo and sat instead at the leper's table, to the rich he preached charity and to the poor he preached contentment.

When he talked to his disciples, he talked about service, and what it meant to be a servant. He talked about emptying yourself for the sake of another, he talked about the good shepherd, he talked about laying your life down for your friends, he talked about giving your life as a ransom for all.

So here, near the end of the gospel account, just before Jesus leaves for Jerusalem and all that Jerusalem means to his ministry, and his suffering and death, he overhears James and John, two of his closest disciples, come to him, perhaps sensing the enormity of the moment and the moments to come, to ask him to "set-them" up, to give his places in his Cabinet, to move them up from campaign groupies to inside men, "grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left when you come into your glory."

Astonished that they were asking what they were asking, perhaps even overwhelmed at how far away they still were from what he had been preaching and teaching all along, he asks them, "Are you sure?" And with a bravado borne of both ignorance and self-righteousness they answer, "Yes, I am, yes, we are."

I can hear the ancients saying, "See, nothing has changed, humanity isn't getting better, it certainly isn't getting any smarter and if given half a chance, we'll still think first about number one, and what's in it for us, each time and every time. Our greed, our self centeredness, our selfishness, is both genetic and environmental, in our DNA and learned from one another.

Which is why I left philosophy behind and went looking for God, because without God, without the goodness I learned that resides in the source and which, from the

beginning, was imparted to us and to all of creation, I'd have to come to the conclusion that there is no hope for us. Without the gift of Christ, without his teaching, without his sacrifice, without his redemption, without the promise his resurrection gives to us who are perishing, without the hope that at my end there awaits a good and gracious, forgiving and welcoming God, my fate seems dismal and hopeless. Because I can't do it on my own, because I have my weaknesses, because I can't seem to be the person I would want to be, because I disappoint and am disappointing and get disappointed, I need the God who says, "Come to me you who tired and heavy burdened and I will give you rest." I need the Father who comes to me when I've left home and squandered my gifts and became that which I wanted least to become and says, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

When I turn in on myself and begin to think only of my needs, I need to hear the words , 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

And when I come to the end of my days, if for only a moment I could claim a mustard seed sized amount of faithfulness, I hope to hear my God say, "Well done good and faithful servant you have been faithful in a few things, enter into the joy of your Lord and Master."

That promise is something philosophy could not give me, only God could. I hear about this promise all the time, in many places, and I hope in some way I have communicated it from time to time, to you, if not again, this very morning.

Amen.