

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Hartford, Connecticut

The Third Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 6, Year C - June 17, 2007

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15 Galatians 2:15-21 Luke 7: 36-8:3 Psalm 32

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THE TENSION BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS

One of the perennial tensions in the Christian life is that between faith and works. It was an attempt to resolve that tension that led Martin Luther and the Protestant reformers in the 16th century to challenge the prevailing theology of the Roman Catholic Church and, in the process, to create an unintended schism between Catholicism and Protestantism that lasts until today.

What is this tension between faith and works and why should we care about it today?

The tension begins with the fact that we were created in God's image and thus are grounded in a special relationship with God that is not shared by any other part of the created order. As the Psalmist says of the human being, God made us but a little lower than the angels and we were adorned with glory and honor. As Eucharistic Prayer C puts it: "You made us the rulers of creation." With that as our fundamental created nature, we were expected to act in such a way as to conform our lives to God's intention for the fulfillment of the whole creation. Our works were to be a contribution to the works of God by which God was bringing the created order to completion.

But, as the prayer goes on to remind us, "we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another." Even after repeated attempts by God to get us to return to God, we used our God-given powers to continue our rebellion against the divine purposes by putting our own interests above those of God and other persons. The moral Law which was intended to be God's gift to us by which we could live in conformity with God's will turned instead into an instrument by which we oppressed others and sought to glorify ourselves. We had become so mired in our own sinful and selfish concerns that we lost the ability to redeem ourselves. This was the fact about the human condition on which Luther and the reformers built their theology of faith. They said, in effect, we cannot work our own way out of our corrupt condition. The gap between ourselves and God can only be closed from the other side, by God himself. And the agency of that closure was divine grace alone: the grace that would forgive our sins despite the fact that *we* had not earned, or merited, the right to demand that God forgive and redeem us.

Our part in this transaction was to accept God's grace by faith to appropriate the divine act of grace, that is, through a willingness to trust that this had happened. What looked like an impossibility: that God had not held our sins against us but had loved us into salvation *regardless* of them, had become not only a possibility but a reality. The only proviso was that we gratefully accept this act of divine grace as the new reality of our lives. This is what Paul means when he says in this morning's epistle that "a person is justified not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, because no one will be justified by the works of the law." In attempting to justify ourselves through obedience to the moral law we reveal how impossible it is for us to do so given our sinfulness. And so Paul can say, somewhat paradoxically, "through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is

no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” What Paul is saying here is that only if we become new selves, dead to our old sinful selves, can we live appropriately to and through God. And this has profound implications for our works or deeds *now*.

The dilemma that arises from our new life in Christ is that, once saved by grace through faith, what do we do with our capacity for doing good works, the very things that cannot save us? Are works therefore dead? The answer is clearly “no”. Good works are our only or at least most effective means of helping others in the concrete situations of their lives. We cannot simply passively wish that others receive justice and liberation from oppression: we have to expend our energies in doing those actions that will actually relieve injustice and bring an end to oppression. We do good works *not* in order to *achieve* salvation but rather to show forth our gratitude for the salvation God *has already given* us through his unmerited grace.

This then becomes the challenge of the Christian life today: how to act in such a way as not to build up merit or fame for ourselves but instead to show forth the glory and greatness of God in saving us despite ourselves. We are clearly not supposed to sit back in sublime spiritual satisfaction and luxuriate in the glory of God’s grace while the travails of the world float by outside our private cocoon. There is still work to be done to fully manifest the reality of God’s love and justice for the whole created order.

All our works, therefore, should point beyond themselves to the realization of God’s intentions rather than our own. And this fact forces us to seek out what those divine intentions are which should call forth our works, and the Biblical witness is quite clear on this point: God’s intentions for the world and its peoples are justice, liberation from oppression, peace, reconciliation, compassion, care for the most vulnerable, and the overcoming of false divisions among people. And these are for people now, in the fullness of their concrete worldly lives, not simply for their spiritual lives.

There will inevitably be many times when doing what will further God’s intentions may frustrate our own more narrow selfish purposes and certainly may offend other people with narrow agendas of their own. It has not been easy for people who have been warning us for years about global warming or the crisis in access to decent health care, a tendency to rush to war, or the genocide in Darfur to get the public, the media, the politicians and even other members of the religious community to pay attention.

And those who have labored in the vineyards trying to address these issues have certainly suffered their share of intimidation, indifference, hostility and rejection. They may find some comfort in Paul’s words two weeks ago that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. In the transformed lives God is making available to us we are free *from* the shackles of selfishness and have become free *for* doing God’s work in the world wherever and whenever that work needs to be done.

We don’t have to retreat into the isolationist cocoon of purely spiritual contemplation but can go boldly into the world to recreate and transform it in tandem with God’s acts to the same end. We can also live the Christian life *fearlessly* because we already have all that any person could ever want: the everlasting and sure embrace of God’s love. Faith can be the vehicle that drives us back into the messiness of the world to address all those things that stand in the way of the triumph of God’s kingdom of righteousness and peace.

The fearless doers of good deeds building on the foundation of God’s salvation of us will courageously name those obstacles that stand in the way of God’s kingdom: obstacles such as an irrational fear of

people who are different, a fear of giving away some of what we possess in abundance so that others might have at least the minimum of what is necessary for a whole and healthy life, a fear of facing up to the changes we will have to make both as a nation and as individuals if we are to address issues of global warming and oil depletion and health care. But if fear is driven ultimately by our concern that our very selves are at risk, then we as Christians can truly be the fearless ones since, through faith, we have been given our true selves back again, restored, renewed, and transformed by God's grace. We are thereby freed by faith to do whatever needs to be done in our time and place to further the work of God's kingdom on earth.

AMEN

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