

## **Sermon: PENTECOST 19, October 4th, 2015**

In the Name...

A priest teaching his Sunday School about the commandments asked, "If I don't go to church, what command am I breaking?" A child said, "Thou shalt observe the Sabbath Day." "And if I cheat in a game?" A child replied, "Thou shalt not steal." "And if my parents tell me not to pull the cat's tail, but, I do it anyway?" Another child piped up, "What God hath joined together let not man put asunder."

In view of our Scripture lessons today, I should probably make some remarks about the world's oldest profession. Of course, we all know what that is, right? It was clearly described in the reading from Genesis. Look at it. Please note, before Eve was created, the first thing Adam did was name the animals; therefore, the world's oldest profession is the science of taxonomy, the classification of the natural order.

I'm sorry. Did you think I was referring to some other profession? Well, if you did, it's that very thing from which our Scriptures from Genesis, Hebrews, and Mark are trying to steer us away.

We live in a world, in a universe, that, at times, seems very large, very strange, and very frightening. We live surrounded by things which are bigger than we are, stronger, faster, better organized. On the whole, we may wonder, where do we fit in? What is our place? And that is what the beginning of Genesis and the letter to the Hebrews remind us of - our place in creation. And it's nothing less than first place. That's right. We humans are superior to everything else in the world. Now, that may seem a very politically incorrect remark considering that humans are, without doubt, the most predatory, wasteful, violent, self-interested species on the planet. Time and time again we hear it pointed out that when it comes to moral behaviour, family life, community responsibility, we have a lot to learn from ants, beavers or even baboons.

And, in many ways, it does look as if the way we order our personal and social lives is inferior to other life forms. But, there is a reason, a very good reason, for this and it is that unlike ants or beavers we human beings have the power to make mistakes. That sounds weird, doesn't it, to say that we are superior because we have the ability to fail. But, it's the result of our ability to make choices, the power that proves that we are made in the image and likeness of the great choice-maker - God.

Beavers build great dams, engineering marvels, but, a family of Wisconsin beavers cannot choose to move to Nevada and dam the Colorado River. An ant colony cannot choose to lend a hand if nearby bees are in trouble.

Sadly, unlike God, we don't always make the right choices. Sometimes we choose to hurt instead of heal, destroy instead of build, put ourselves ahead of others, but, the fact that we can choose to do the right and good thing is part of our human dignity. So, when it comes to the material world, there is nothing to rival us.

But, the Bible is about everything that God made and that is not restricted to what we experience with our five senses. In the Creed, we profess belief in God who made all that is - seen and

unseen, the visible and invisible. And Hebrews reminds us that in the unseen part of creation the angels live.

What are angels? Well, one thing they are not are the spirits of dead people. We do not become angels when we die. That's Hollywood fiction. Angels are beings of pure spirit as different to you and me as we are to rocks. Unlike us, angels have perfect intelligence and logic. They don't have to learn anything because they know everything. They know exactly what God wants at all times. In every respect, they are as superior to us as we are to rocks. Every respect, that is, except one. And it is that one important respect that makes us ultimately superior even to them.

The Bible says that God looked at all his creation and said that it was all good, but it also tells us that out of everything he had made he said that there was only one thing he loved and that was us.

For some people, that is the hardest thing to believe. How can we human beings, with all our mistakes, be lovable? And the answer is that there is no answer. There is no answer to that question. There is no answer because love is something that cannot be arrived at by logic. True love is not something that anybody deserves or that anybody can earn.

There is not one husband who deserves the love of a wife and not one child who deserves the love of a parent. We can earn respect, we can demand obedience, but, love is beyond our control. And yet, it is something we do all the time. And that, more than our power to build the greatest monuments or explore the greatest depths, more than our power to organize societies or even create new life, our ability to love is what makes us more like God than anything else. And that is why God did not put angels or ants in charge of the universe, he placed us.

The philosopher Rene Descartes famously remarked, "Cogito ergo sum", "I think, therefore, I am." And, yes, we think, and thinking is a distinctly human characteristic. But, that's only half the truth. In response to Descartes, the Bible says, "God loves, therefore we are." God loves, therefore, we are. And the Gospel reading was about that love that makes us more than human, it makes us almost divine.

The Pharisees are asking Jesus, today, about divorce in order to trap him. There were many different schools of interpretation on the subject, back then. The Shammai school taught that the only ground was adultery – by the wife, not the husband - while the Hillel school gave 218 reasons that a man could divorce his wife, including burning his dinner or finding a better looking woman. And there were other groups with their own views. It was a controversial topic.

The Pharisees were trying to pigeon-hole Jesus by forcing him to declare on an hot-button issue. Jesus usually avoided such traps by appealing to the middle ground, but, where was the middle ground here? So, Jesus' answer was not to point out the middle ground, but the higher ground.

He essentially says, "You've got it all wrong. You're focusing on the legalities of divorce. Let me tell you about the realities of marriage." And, so, he goes back to quote the Genesis story to

highlight the marital bond as being something more than merely a contract. Marriage is a sacred covenant.

Many times in Scripture, God is given the opportunity to divorce us, to destroy or abandon us, but, each time he refuses because "It is not good for man to be alone" doesn't just mean the male sex, it means the human race. It is not good for us to be alone in the world and so the first marriage vow, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Yes, that's a marriage vow.

God did not make an easy world with simple choices. He knew the struggles we would face in keeping together as families, as communities, which is why he is, as our collect reminded us, "more ready to hear than we to pray", and gives "more than we either desire or deserve." That is the divine love he wants us to model. Angels can't do it. And neither can ants or baboons. Only we have that power.

Science may be the world's oldest profession, but, love is the world's first principle and Christ entered the world to help us recognize that. We belong to each other and we belong to God. If we can live that, and live with that, then we will have and find our place - on earth and in heaven.

In the Name...