

GOD CAN'T HATE US

Ash Wednesday, March 9, 2011

Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Welcome fellow sinners! I once heard this as an opening for a sermon during the season of Lent. It's a subtle reminder who we are during Lent ... sinners. Most clergy don't like to talk about sin. Some think it's old fashioned, outdated and outmoded. But sin still lurks around the corner to snare us. It is still a problem.

So here we are, in Lent, the season of penitence. The word comes from the same root as repentance and means to turn around, or turn back to ... it's about conversion. We are called to turn our lives around and turn back to God. Lent is marked by devotional practices to help us on the journey: generosity; prayer; fasting and study. All of these are meant to awaken us to God's grace. Lent seeks to bring us back to God.

Why do we need Lent? Didn't Jesus take care of all that for us? Yes, and no. Sin and evil continue to be a reality in our lives ... and we ignore its presence. We are sinners and we can't escape that fact. It is we who drift away from God. Most often we do it slowly. The causes are just as many: apathy; disappointment; disillusionment; fatigue; being too busy; and, a host of other reasons.

But despite us, our sin and the evil it leads to, GOD LOVES US! Herb O'Driscoll says that God can't hate us! God can't hate what God has created! Herb goes on to say that this important because we hate. Think about it ... we hate. If we were to make a list, we would hesitate at first. Me? I don't hate anyone! But if we are honest, the list would be written, and surprisingly, it would grow long. We hate terrorists; those of different sexual orientation; the opposite political party; bankers and Wall Street (very popular right now); immigrants; and, anyone who is different from us. The lethal list grows and like sin, we deny it exists. If our hates were not true, why do we account for racism? Terrorism? The Holocaust? Road rage? Murder? Bullying? Hit and run drivers? War?

The reality is our sin leads to hate. Hate leads to evil, destruction and death. The Other reality is that God loves us ... like a parent the Psalm says today. When I do baptismal preparation with parents, I go over the Baptismal Creed with them. There is the one place where it talks about one of the greatest teachings of Jesus ... forgiveness. I ask the parents, is there anything your child could do that you couldn't forgive? The mothers are usually the first to respond no! Fathers usually take a little longer (more reflection, I guess!), but also say no.

Why do parents say they could forgive their children? It's because they love them. This is a hint; this points us towards the profound truth of how God views us! There is nothing we could do that God won't, and already has forgiven us. But this does not mean that God might admonish us, or teach us, or seek to move us in another direction. The truth is that God can't hate us, God loves us.

I'm a parent and I know how important that love is for a child. There was a time when my daughter was about four or five and I had to be a tough parent. We had just visited some Church friends and were going home. I noticed my daughter playing with something I didn't recognize, so I asked her what she had. Her answer, "Nothing!" as she tried to hide the toys. I stopped and questioned her more. She said the kids of where we visited had

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given them to her. The more I pressed, the more uncomfortable she became. She finally admitted she had taken them.

I felt strongly that I needed to teach my daughter that this was wrong. I drove to the local police station and marched her inside. I asked the officer what he did with people who stole something. He looked at me, and then down at my daughter who was looking away. The officer smiled and said in a loud deep voice, “Why, we put them in jail!” This got my daughter’s attention. I asked if we could see the jail. This was a local police station and I knew they only had a holding cell. The officer took us back to the cell, and I put my daughter in it and closed the door. My daughter looked shocked and scared for the first time.

We left the police station and went back to our friend’s house. I made my daughter confessed her wrong. Our friends said it wasn’t a problem, but I insisted that the toys be returned. When we left the house, I told my daughter that I loved her and gave her a hug. I couldn’t hate her, but I did have to teach her. In her defense, now that she is an adult, I must say that I’m proud of her. She’s on the Vestry of her Church, been a Convention Delegate, is an officer and sings in the choir!

If we say God loves us and can’t hate us it doesn’t mean that God might not test us or challenge us. A loving parent wants the best for their child but also must discipline and teach the child. If we are to help our children to enter into the fullest of what God created them to be ... then we must teach them what is wrong, how to identify and resist sin, how not to become hateful.

All God asks for is a chance, an opening, an opportunity to love us. This is what I think it means to have a “new heart” today. Lent confronts us with our need for Good. We may feel remorse, or a desire for something more with God and that is all it takes for the change to take place. That is all that God needs to help work repentance in our lives.

Paul says in the reading today that NOW is the time. Lent is the time for us to change, to turn back to God. The word for Lent comes from the word “lencton”, which means the lengthening of days. This is the season of change and longer days ... not is the time for us to lengthen our relationship with God through Christ. Now is the time for us to create a new heart and a new life!

Jesus shows us the way to do this during Lent. He is the way to new life. Jesus calls us to repentance to turn around and turn back to God. Lent is the time for our change of heart, to recognize our need for God, to treat others and ourselves differently ... better. When we do this, we break the death hold of sine. We can place our trust and hope in Jesus Christ. He is the one who bridges the gulf between God and us by his sacrifice. There is hope for us. Lent is a time to be and do life differently ... to reach for the embrace of a loving God who can’t hate us! May God help us to lengthen our lives with God this Holy Lent.